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JULIAN KARSLAKE'S SECRET

A NOVEL

BY

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*'It is open to us as a possibility, but closed against us as a right,
to follow the lower when the higher calls'*

IN THREE VOLUMES

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JULIAN KARSLAKE'S SECRET.



CHAPTER XXXI.

KARSLAKE was quite correct in thinking that Sybil had not arranged the details of her departure herself. The letter the maid-servant witnessed to her having received was from Helstone, suggesting the best steps to take to secure the secrecy of her movements, and making her acquainted with the arrangements he had already made in her behalf. He proposed that she should drive in the first instance to the Midland Hotel, and that he should meet her there at a fixed hour in the

afternoon, in order to discuss future plans for her guidance and welfare. He added he would bring his sister with him.

Up to the point of allowing herself to be driven to the hotel named, by the cabman previously tutored by Helstone, Sybil followed the prescribed programme implicitly; but there her docility ceased. The misery she had suffered since she consented to abandon her home had crushed for a time her mental independence and strength, but it was inevitable to a girl of her native force of character that the reaction should not be far off. As she sat in one of the formal and dreary sitting-rooms of the hotel, passively waiting for the hour to strike when she might expect her advisers, a certain degree of composure and rallying power already came to her.

She shrank with absolute repugnance from a second interview with Helstone. Why should

she subject herself to it? Also, what claim had he to know where and under what conditions she led the life he had so cruelly maimed? To be subjected to his discretionary visits and ceaseless observation would be an insufferable bondage, from which pride and self-respect equally revolted. It formed no part of the pledge he had exacted from her; therefore she was free to consult her own quickening desire for perfect independence of action.

Her first natural idea had been that she would go back to her father; but reflection showed her that this was impracticable on many grounds. Helstone would have forbidden it as contrary to the bond; for he not only required separation from her husband, but absolute concealment, and Ashlands could not have afforded that. Also, she could not have endured the complications that would assuredly have arisen in any attempt to make Mr.

Dorrimore understand the situation. No ; she must not only cut herself off from Julian, but from the strong family ties that had formerly made up the paramount interest of her life.

As she reached this point of conclusion, and saw the dreary waste that her existence would become, her courage almost gave way. She rose up from her seat with a sudden determination to risk all, and return to the blessedness she had forsaken. What, after all, mattered outside estimates of right and merit if they were together? Would not Julian prefer his love to his honour?

But the very phrase in which the idea formed itself in her mind brought its own swift confutation with it. Her lips expressed an instant self-scorn for a vacillation so unworthy ; granted that he would, his wife would not prefer it for him. Keenly as she might suffer, it was better than to have his head bowed

under the stress of popular indignation, and his career blighted and distorted by unmerited but overwhelming disgrace. Even now, at that hour, the burden he had carried so long had fallen off his shoulders, and he was a free man ; —and she had enfranchised him !

A glow of ardour came over her pale cheek, and lighted the fires in her pathetic eyes, as this thought animated her and helped her to calmer practical conclusions.

Instead of waiting for the Helstones, and submitting her arrangements to their decision, she would go away at once and conceal her place of abode equally from all.

For a few moments she bent her mind in anxious consideration on the difficulty as to where she should go. That she had very few personal or intimate friends was scarcely to be regretted, for to the friendship of no one could she have appealed in this strait. The object

chiefly to be attained—nay, the only object to be attained—was to find shelter in some place where she was least likely to be sought or found. Chance would achieve that for her, perhaps better than arrangement.

It occurred to her, as an act of desirable precaution, not to start on her vague journey from the neighbouring station, for Helstone would inevitably trace her movements in that case. She would get the people at the hotel to order a cab for her at once, and break the clue by driving to the South-Western terminus.

There was no difficulty in carrying this out. Her quiet dress and modest travelling case, in connection with her sad, sweet face, and also, it may be added, with the very light refreshment she had ordered as a point of form, suggested to the female head of the establishment the idea of her being some young governess going to her situation under the pressure of home sickness.

She got into her cab, and was driven from the hotel without having excited the smallest amount of suspicion or even curiosity in those with whom she had come into contact.

Arrived at Waterloo she felt a greater feeling of security, owing to the circumstance of her previous familiarity with the station and route. She would travel westward, not stopping indeed in the locality of her own beloved home, but below that, to some of the beautiful sea-side nooks to be found on the coast of Devon.

But by this time the afternoon was far advanced, and darkness had set in. She was not only physically exhausted, but shrank from the prospect of a night journey by mail-train, which was the only alternative before her. Should she spend the night at the railway hotel, and start on her reluctant exile by the mid-day train on the morrow? No; that she feared to do, lest the ingenuity of Helstone or the despairing love of Karslake should seek and

find her, and in the latter case her work would be undone, for she knew she would never have the power to part from him a second time and under the dear coercion of his authority.

Better would it be to put some measure of distance between them before she slept, and by thus again breaking her journey she would render discovery more difficult.

She took her ticket for Esher,—not that she had any knowledge of or predilection for the place, but because an elderly lady of highly-respectable and reserved demeanour preceded her at the office, booking herself for that station, and Sybil desired the protection of her companionship. When at last she found herself sitting opposite to her, in a dingy, imperfectly-lighted first-class carriage, and rushing out of the station into the rain, sleet, and fog of the all-pervading night, she felt she had never realised the extremity of her misery until then.

It was about the dinner-hour at S. Mark's Rectory, but there would be no gathering round the table to-night. Julian was probably seeking her at that moment, and the boys, leaning against each other as they always did when they were in trouble, were exhausting their boyish ingenuity in conjecturing what had become of her. And what conclusions would they reach? what satisfactory explanation could be given them? They would go back to Winchester with a weight on their young spirits, which would hinder the progress they and she had been so anxious to make. Again, was her husband to be burdened for life with the charge of her family, when all that made life sweet to him had been withdrawn? After all, had she judged wisely? was she doing right?

‘But that is the question we all ask ourselves in our moments of weakness,’ she answered herself. ‘I must rely on the decision of braver

moods ; ' and she checked the sob in her throat and wiped away the tears that had not fallen, and by this time the train stopped, and ' Esher ' was being shouted unintelligibly along the line.

She and her travelling companion, who had not once broken silence, got out together, and Sybil followed in her footsteps in a blind mechanical way. It was necessary to cross the line to the gate of egress on the opposite side, and this accomplished, the necessity of some direct personal action became imperative.

The situation was dreary in the extreme. The rain was now falling fast through a dense mist that blotted out every object at a few yards distance, while a biting wind swept round the corners of the half-roofed and scantily-lighted station.

In another moment Sybil would be alone in the unknown waste, with the exception of the

couple of porters who were stamping up and down the platform, to keep their stagnating blood in circulation ; for no one but herself and the lady had got out at Esher, and the latter stepped out so briskly she would soon be beyond her range of vision.

Moved by desperation, Mrs. Karlake took courage to lay her hand timidly on her shoulder, in order to engage her attention.

‘ Can you tell me if there is a respectable inn near the station ? ’ she asked.

‘ There is one,’ replied a cold, guarded voice, out of her manifold wrappings and the mist, ‘ and I have no doubt it is respectable. But are you alone, and without friends in this place ? ’

‘ Yes,’ said Sybil in a low voice, ‘ and not in this place only.’

‘ And you are a respectable girl ? ’ continued the other ; ‘ one, I mean, that a good woman need not be ashamed to befriend ? ’

Sybil's heart throbbed with complex emotion. 'I am that, but—does a good woman only befriend the respectable?'

'Humph! you are quick at retort, at least; but I have taken stock of you in the carriage, and I call myself a physiognomist. I will do what ninety-nine women out of a hundred would not do, that is, I will welcome a stranger, of whom I know nothing, to bed and board to-night, provided she is willing to come home with me.'

'Really? You are not mocking me, I mean?'

The inflection of the voice was so suggestive of a gratitude beyond the occasion, that it told its own tale of the mental condition of the speaker, and touched a chord in a very guarded but sensitive heart.

'I am quite in earnest. Follow me close; I expect to find my servant with a lantern out-

side. Prepare for a short walk down a very dirty lane, and our trunks will follow.'

Sybil obeyed, walking like one in a dream. Just beyond the station a woman was standing, lantern in hand. She greeted her mistress with respect, quickened by cordiality.

'I have a friend with me to-night, Martha,' she said significantly. 'Walk on first and show us the way carefully. What atrocious weather!'

The walk was short, and the darkness rendered every object invisible. On one side of the road Sybil thought she distinguished the outlines of houses, showing like phantoms through the mist.

Presently the servant stopped before a small iron gate set in a thick box hedge; they went up a narrow garden path, ascended some stone steps, that gleamed wet and white beneath the rays of the lantern, and soon stood within the shelter of a door with a heavy porch over it.

‘Stand well under shelter,’ said the stranger, ‘you shall not be kept long waiting in the dark ; Martha has to go round to open the door ;’ and the next minute they heard the key turned and bolt withdrawn ; the door was flung swiftly open, and the cheering light and warmth of the interior smiled upon them. Sybil was led through the cosy and prettily-furnished hall into a parlour, that looked the perfection of homely comfort to the weary, sore-hearted girl. The blaze of a glorious fire, and the soft light of a shaded lamp shed over the spotless cloth of a table laid for tea, were some of the accessories of the cheerful scene.

‘My dear, throw off your hat and jacket on the sofa, and we will drink a cup of tea before we go upstairs. Sit here,’ pulling a low chair in front of the fire, ‘and let me introduce myself. My name is Harrison, and

I am sole lessee and proprietor of my little demesne—ergo, I am an old maid.'

Sybil obeyed in silence, for her heart was too full for speech. The sense of security, the marvellous kindness which had come to meet her so strangely, broke down her strained composure, and she knew if she tried to speak she should burst into tears. She stood in the comparative shade of the corner where the sofa was placed, slowly laying aside her wraps and furs, and striving for self-command.

Miss Harrison paid no apparent attention to her ; she was busy in making the tea from the little copper kettle, bright as burnished bronze, which Martha had brought in, and giving instructions for hot toast and ham ; also some further orders in a lower key, which did not reach Sybil's ears, in reference to having a good fire in the guest chamber. But, all the same, there was not a point of external indica-

tion which escaped her keen vision. As Sybil, at length, having no further excuse to linger, came slowly forward and sat down in the chair placed for her, Miss Harrison instinctively marked and appraised every detail of her appearance and costume.

The dark-blue cloth dress, simply made but exquisite in texture, style, and completeness; the embroidered linen which encircled the delicate throat and wrists; the little brooch which fastened her collar, and the chain to which her watch was hung, were recognised as gems of art, the product of the Venetian goldsmith's ancient skill.

It would be in vain to deny that her night of watching and tears, and day of suffering and fatigue, had dimmed the beauty of her face, but the inalienable charm of perfect contour remained untouched, and the pathos of the heavy eyes and drooping mouth did more for

her with the woman who was observing her, than the softest bloom or brightest grace of expression could have done. Her hands lay folded loosely and weariedly in her lap, and it never occurred to her mind that the thick hoop of gold, which was the only ring she wore, would at once declare to her hostess her position as a wife.

Miss Harrison poured out her fragrant tea into dainty cups of Chelsea china, which most housekeepers would have had on a shelf or in a cabinet ; but she liked to utilise her pretty things, and brought one over to where Sybil sat, not suffering her to rise and fetch it for herself.

There was something in the gracious kindness of the action that touched Mrs. Karslake's softened and agitated mind profoundly, as well as recalling to it the incidents of the early morning, so sharply stamped in her memory.

It was with an effort she steadied her shaking hand, so as to take a firm hold of the costly cup.

‘You are too good to me,’ she said in a low tone, that her courage and constancy constrained to firmness. ‘Your kindness is almost more than I can bear!’

‘You will find your powers of endurance stronger when you have taken a little food. Be advised, my dear, and try and follow my good example—our troubles always loom bigger when we are faint with hunger and fatigue. After you have eaten a little you shall go upstairs to your room and rest and wash, and afterwards we will have some talk together, and you shall tell me just so much or so little as you feel disposed. Come!’

Sybil obeyed. To show gratitude by obedience was an instinct of her nature; and although, as she watched Miss Harrison placing

the daintiest morsels temptingly upon her plate, she felt sure she would not be able to swallow a mouthful, she found she was mistaken. She had scarcely tasted food all day, and her vigorous youth vindicated its natural claims to appetite : she had not known how physically exhausted she was till she felt the reviving influence of her new friend's hospitality.

Miss Harrison watched her with the keenest pleasure. The absence of all affectation, the graceful simplicity of the girl pleased her abundantly ; she chatted discursively to distract her attention while she ate, and felt herself amply rewarded when a faint smile parted the lips of her unknown guest.

After tea she introduced her herself to her pleasant bedchamber, where the same nicety and cheerful warmth prevailed as seemed common to the whole establishment, and left her, with the promise that she would call

for her on her way down-stairs in half an hour.

Her travelling box stood already unstrapped in the room ; a little brazen pitcher of classical shape was sending up wreaths of steam from the washing-stand ; snowy towels ; crimson curtains shutting out the dreary night ; an American rocking-chair before the bright fire on the thick piled rug, gave an aspect of inviting comfort and friendly welcome to the scene.

Sybil looked about her with eyes wet with chastened feeling. Would that Julian could know how circumstances had tempered the severity of her distress ! Julian ! would he not look beyond circumstance, and attribute the mercy she had found to that supreme Director whom he so silently but persistently recognised and served ? Ah ! would he find his religious faith adequate in this crisis to his own consolation ?

A tender smile played round her mouth ; she sat down in the tempting chair by the fire-side, and drawing out of her pocket the little book she had taken out of his chair that morning, found some faint sense of relief by holding it in her caressing hands, pressing it against her bosom, or laying her yearning lips upon its worn covers. It did not occur to her to open and read ; what soothing power it had lay in the fact that it had been carried near the heart, and daily handled by the touch, from which she was so cruelly divorced.

The sound of her hostess's quick movements in the passage outside startled her from this mood of self-indulgence.

‘I shall call for you in ten minutes !’ she cried cheerily as she passed her door, and by that time Sybil was ready to accompany her down-stairs.

Miss Harrison placed herself in a huge easy

chair close to the fire, and, taking up a black silk stocking she was knitting, motioned to Sybil to take the seat opposite her.

‘Sit down, my dear. I always go to bed at ten o’clock, and it is now precisely nine: that gives us a full hour for improving our acquaintance. You will not object to my asking you a few questions—it will be the easiest way of satisfying my own mind—and you are not bound to answer them.’

‘But if I refuse to answer them you will doubt my respectability!’

‘Did I not tell you I was a physiognomist? And I read a candour in your face that fixed my interest far more than its claims to beauty. Shall I tell you my hypothesis in regard to your situation? You are a young wife, possibly deeply attached to your husband, and you are leaving him because you think it your duty to do so.’

‘Yes,’ was the answer, in a low voice, ‘that is precisely the case.’

Miss Harrison lowered her knitting-needles and fixed her keen gaze on the speaker.

‘I have seen a great deal of the world—of life, as it is called—before I settled down on this spot of earth. I have witnessed a great deal of suffering, and had my own share of tribulation, too, and one of the ethical conclusions I have reached is this—that in nine cases out of ten the sin of the transgressor is less deplorable in its results than the condemnation of the righteous. My dear, are you quite sure you are right?’

A pale glow passed over Sybil’s face. Her eyes slowly kindled with a look of spiritual enthusiasm.

‘My husband is not a transgressor,’ she said.

‘In that case, I am at a loss either to speculate or advise.’

‘I think,’ continued Sybil gently, ‘if you will allow me, I will wait till to-morrow before I acknowledge your kindness by my confidence. I mean, I should like to think the matter over; so many interests besides my own are concerned.’

Miss Harrison was decidedly disappointed. Her interest, not to say her curiosity, had been deeply stirred, but she accepted the decision with well-bred acquiescence.

‘So be it,’ she answered. ‘I have no doubt you are right.’

‘And if I should decide I cannot tell you,’ said Sybil, rising and kneeling on the floor at her feet, ‘you must hold judgment in suspense and condemn neither of us! I think it is quite possible that one or both may be making a grave mistake, but at least,’ with a heavy sigh, ‘it is not on the side of self-indulgence that we err.’

Miss Harrison bent over her, and passed her hand tenderly over the dark, shining braids of hair.

‘My child,’ she answered, ‘hear another lesson from my experience. We never go further astray than when we pick up and bind a voluntary cross upon our shoulders. Believe me, the martyrdom that wins and saves is never sought or self-imposed.’

Sybil took her hand and kissed it.

‘I am quite sure you are right,’ she said gravely; and then, rising, she drew out of the bosom of her dress a miniature portrait of Karlake, that had been painted in Rome, and which she wore attached to her neck by an invisible string. She detached it and handed it to her hostess.

‘You say you are a physiognomist: interpret that face for me.’

Miss Harrison took it eagerly, and walked

under the lamp with it for better inspection. The picture was a fine rendering of a countenance in which the highest type of physical beauty struck the observer less than its spiritual expression.

‘Am I to accept this as a portrait?’ lifting up her quick gaze, ‘or is it an imaginative artist’s attempt to work up a good subject to perfection?’

‘It is a portrait that, in my opinion, falls far short of the original.’

The other smiled and gazed a little longer; then, returning it, said:

‘If that man is your husband, my dear, the only advice I shall have to give you to-morrow is to return to him at once, at all costs.’

CHAPTER XXXII.

SYBIL was at once so weary and so soothed and comforted by the circumstances of the night, that she fell asleep soon after her head was laid on the pillow. But after two or three hours' slumber she awoke; the fire in her room was out, and profound darkness and silence reigned.

Who does not know such hours of awakening, when the pain that sleep has lulled—the life-agony we have forgotten in oblivion—seizes upon our quickening consciousness with renewed vigour? She started up in bed, at a momentary loss to realise where she was, and frightened at her strange surroundings; and

then, as all the cruel truth recurred to her, sank back again with an inarticulate moan of suffering.

There was no more sleep for her that night, and it would be tedious to follow her mental conflict through its long watches ; but Miss Harrison was distressed to see that her guest looked paler and more worn at breakfast than when she had parted from her overnight.

When the meal was over, and her domestic arrangements made, she established herself, stocking in hand, in her accustomed place by the fireside ; and invited Sybil, who was looking drearily out of the window into the small, strictly enclosed garden, to a seat by her side.

‘My dear,’ she said, ‘I am an old woman, and can keep a secret ; I think you will do well to trust me.’

Sybil came towards her.

‘I will trust you,’ she answered passionately, ‘because I begin to distrust myself and my own courage.’

And then she sat down and told her story, not disguising names or localities. The only point she reserved—and Sara Helstone’s prompt misgivings had taught her the wisdom of doing this—were the details of the accusation against her husband.

Miss Harrison knitted as she listened; it gave the speaker confidence to see that she was able to take her disclosures quietly, and she occasionally interrupted her with a sagacious and penetrating question in the most matter-of-fact tone of voice.

When she had finished she asked:

‘And what are your plans for the future, my dear Mrs. Karslake?’

‘I mean to take the mid-day train to Ply-

mouth, and end my journey at one of the beautiful, lonely sea-coast places in Devon.'

'And take lodgings or a house? Are you well provided with money?'

'I should take lodgings, of course. I have money enough for immediate emergencies, and means of earning money when that is gone.'

Her colour rose as she spoke; she was always unwilling to refer ever so distantly to her literary work.

'You have no private means, then? You will, I am sure, wish me to be frank with you. If Mr. Karslake is rich, did he do nothing in the way of marriage settlements?'

A flame of colour swept over Sybil's cheek.

'Yes,' she answered, 'he settled three hundred pounds a-year upon me, concerning the expenditure of which he never asks a question, or will suffer me to give any account. But I will not touch that now.'

‘Why not? Will it make him happier to know it is accumulating at his banker’s, and that his wife has not only thought proper to leave him, but to work or starve as well?’

‘I have no intention of starving, but work will keep mind and time employed, and I could not bring myself to draw upon his funds when the poor compensation of my love and help is withdrawn.’

‘And do not you think he will find you out in your Devon solitude? or that failing, how long do you suppose your own resolution will last? Is this heroic separation to be for all time?’

‘God forbid!’ cried Sybil. ‘But meantime I shall hold to my purpose with all the tenacity I can; for if I were to fail, and go back to him and bring destruction upon him, even his love would not reconcile me to my own contempt.’

But, at bottom, I fear I am hoping he will discover and coerce me, or that my strength of mind will give way, and I shall delude myself into thinking I have mistaken my duty;’ and the unhappy girl bowed her face upon her hands and burst into tears.

‘My poor child,’ said Miss Harrison in a tone of tender ridicule, ‘it is all on both sides a Quixotic magnanimity! The good opinion of the world was never yet worth the sacrifice of a love like yours, and I am almost equally sure Mr. Karlake is straining a point of honour beyond reason and necessity. Don’t you think he will give way to get you back again?’

‘No; I think it is possible circumstances may arise which will set him free to give the explanation he now withholds, but otherwise my belief is he would rather die than break his bond.’

‘Die!’ repeated the other with a smile. ‘My dear, that is not by any means the hardest thing to do; does not Bacon remind us that there is no passion so weak but it has overcome the fear of death? It will be much harder for your husband to live, with all his duty-work to do, and everything that made life pleasant taken away.’

Then silence fell between the two women, broken after a while by the clock on the mantel-piece striking eleven.

‘I must go,’ said Sybil rising, ‘go and shut my trunk and prepare for my journey. I have no words to thank you, but I shall never forget you so long as I live!’

Her face was pale, but she had wiped away all traces of tears; it was easy to see she was holding her endurance at high strain.

‘And why should you go?’ exclaimed Miss Harrison suddenly, dashing away the moisture

from her own eyes. 'I doubt if any hole or corner in Devon can be safer than this little Surrey village. I am a lone woman, with no friends on the spot and a bigger house than I want; your sweet face took me captive before your sad story won my heart. You shall stay here!'

Sybil hesitated; her heart grew warm in welcome of the idea, but dare she embrace it consistently with her duty and her bond?

Miss Harrison watched her changing face with intense interest.

'Let us consider the matter seriously,' she said. 'No one has seen you but Martha, and I have already introduced you as a friend of my own. Such you can remain. She knows I have often talked of engaging some intelligent girl as companion to myself, and, if it will not hurt your pride, that is the rôle that you shall fill. You will have to drop your name and even your

status as a wife, but you will find a home and a friend instead of the dreary isolation you had in view. Will you consent ?'

'Only too thankfully, if you really think I can accept your offer with any reasonable prospect of concealment; also, if you will allow me the poor equivalent of paying my own expenses. In our respective circumstances I could not be dependent even on such sweet charity as yours.'

Miss Harrison reflected. 'Well, my dear, that shall be as you please. As you are something of a *grande dame*, perhaps it is only fair, and in that case you will have to draw upon your marriage settlement, which appears to me the most sensible thing you can do, only we shall have to be very guarded and diplomatic in doing it. May I ask, in my new character of motherly friend, if that tin case is all you have brought away from home ?'

‘Yes,’ said Sybil sadly, ‘and it is all I need. I shall never have occasion to go out. When I want more clothes I can buy them, but I could not take away anything beyond absolute necessities; as it was it seemed a sort of robbery.’

‘That is your hyper-refined way of viewing things. It strikes me that the wardrobe you have left behind you will be a very small compensation to Mr. Karslake, and a considerable loss to yourself. I will venture to say you have not a summer garment with you!’

Sybil smiled. ‘That I certainly have not, but I have never been accustomed to much change of dress; that is, before I was married. It will matter very little now what I put on—of course, I shall never wish to meet your friends.’

‘I don’t know about that; too marked a retirement would excite curiosity and lead to inquiry and speculation. You will have to show

sometimes, my dear ; but comfort yourself ! I have hardly a friend in the place beyond the doctor and the parson, and a sensible old lady who keeps a school. Incidental visitors, afternoon-tea callers, are unknown. But what am I to call you ?' pursued Miss Harrison, with a vivacious interest in the situation that jarred painfully on the nerves of her companion. ' Shall it be Miss Keith ? the initial letter will be the same as your own, and—pardon my reminding you—you will have to take off that ring.'

In the energy of her zeal, and the keenness of her common sense, she had failed for a moment in the considerate sympathy she had hitherto shown, and was recalled to a sense of the fact by the involuntary contraction of pain that passed over Sybil's face.

'Forgive my bluntness, my dear ! It is a fault that has beset me all my life, and even

spoilt a friendship before to-day. But it shall not spoil ours, I hope?'

Sybil stooped and kissed her gratefully, but her heart was too full for speech. She went away for a little time, under the plea of making certain necessary arrangements, but really to strengthen and calm her mind in solitude; and when she came back Miss Harrison silently observed that she had followed her suggestion.

From that day a sort of mechanical routine life began for Mrs. Karlake. She had suffered herself to be introduced as Miss Keith to her friend's few friends, and then withdrawn herself as soon as politeness and discretion would permit. In order to account for her obvious sadness and depression, Miss Harrison invented the legend that she had fallen from a higher rank, and lost fortune and lover at the same time—hence the warm sympathy she felt for her; and this

romance was currently reported at Esher, though it did not reach Sybil's ears.

She had had the wisdom to stipulate for perfect freedom in regard to her hours of privacy, and for the privilege of a constant fire in her pleasant and commodious bedroom. The first purchase she made on her own account, was a writing-desk of plain but adequate construction, as her intention was to carry on her literary work, with a sustained industry and purpose greater than she had been able or even desirous of putting forth before.

It was to this source she looked for the supply of money to meet her current expenses, for, in spite of Miss Harrison's common sense, she still felt an invincible reluctance to draw upon her husband's bankers, a reluctance which she felt quite sure would only yield to the most stringent necessity.

Also, she was able to console herself with

the reflection that such a necessity was not likely to arise. She had always communicated with her publishers under a *nom de plume*, so that no obstacle barred the way to her carrying on her negotiations as before ; and the chances were that the ripening effects of time, suffering, and experience would enhance her intellectual capacity, and the pecuniary value of her work. Moreover, there was already a small fund of her previous earnings invested elsewhere, which she would be free to draw upon to meet her heavier liabilities ; and although, as we have said before, she had originally destined that for her brothers' use, she now felt that the cruel force of circumstance would prevent her from carrying out her intention.

The evenings of the days were always spent in Miss Harrison's society, or it was clearly understood that each might put in a claim on the other's company at any particular time, if so

disposed ; for there was a complete absence of selfish exaction on both sides.

Sybil never talked about her literary work to her friend, nor read any portion of it aloud, her opinion being that power and concentration were wasted in so doing ; and she was not at all displeased to find that Miss Harrison's abiding impression was that her labour was an admirable resource, but of small intrinsic merit.

The only relaxation she enjoyed was a daily constitutional walk across the fields, or through the lanes of the neighbourhood, which her health and former habits of life rendered imperative. She had declined to go to church at all, having a morbid dread of being recognised by some chance stranger, and also, it must be owned, an imperfect sense of the benefits to be derived from the teachings of the prosy, gossiping, middle-aged gentleman she had heard discourse in her friend's parlour.

This point Miss Harrison had warmly disputed with her, but without effect ; she had asked Sybil what she should say in the way of decent explanation to her friends.

‘It would never do, my dear, to let them think you are a Pagan or a Freethinker—the ægis of my respectability would scarcely reach so far as that. Mr. Ellis would insist on my turning you out of doors, before my own faith became perverted. I would rather spread the report you are stone-deaf or a Papist.’

Sybil smiled. ‘If it is necessary to fib in my behalf, which will be another item in the reckoning of my debt to you, please tell people the former ; otherwise Mr. Ellis will be bent on my conversion.’

Miss Harrison shook her head, laughing.

‘I have never particularly inquired into Mr. Karlake’s religious views, but surely they must be the broadest of the broad, or he

would never have chosen such a heretic as yourself.'

It was consistent with Sybil's delicate reserve of nature that she only answered this sally with a smile. To justify the opinions of either her husband or herself, would have seemed to her a breach of sacred confidence.

Equally did she shut up within herself the slow anguish of her daily life : the desire that was almost insupportable, the passionate yearning that sapped the springs of youth within her. Many a night witnessed her conflict and her tears, but morning always saw her in time for Miss Harrison's early breakfast, pale and grave of necessity, but gentle and self-contained.

It was now the ambition of her heart to emulate her husband's graces.

But when the long day was over, and her chamber door secured against intrusion for the

night, she would unfasten the ring which she wore attached to the same elastic string as his portrait, kiss it with a lingering tenderness that had a touch of solemnity in it, slip it on her finger, and wear it till the morning came, and the dreary round of pretence and unreality had to be resumed.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

‘THE whole matter is incredible—an insult to common sense ! Your letter was unintelligible, and your explanation of it worse. What I want to know is simply this—what has become of my daughter ?’

The speaker is Herbert Dorrimore and the scene the old library at Ashlands, looking almost precisely the same as on the dreary November afternoon we first introduced the reader to it.

Whatever amenities had been otherwise introduced into the household, had not been allowed to penetrate here. The room was as forlorn of aspect, the fire as meagre and comfortless as then, and the scholar himself, paler

and thinner than of old, was as much at odds with the world as ever. The burden of his family cares, however lightened, still pressed upon him with a weight that he resented as a personal injury, and the public was growing more and more indifferent to his efforts to enlighten and instruct. Moreover, the one thing he loved, as well as his narrow and tepid nature could love anything, was his daughter Sybil, and he had long ago convinced himself that in giving her to Julian Karlake he had done a very noble action, on the lines of unselfish sacrifice. As for the substantial benefits he and his received from his son-in-law, he had brought himself to regard these as a very inadequate recognition of the same, and thus he avoided the uncomfortable necessity of gratitude.

It was part and parcel of the same cold-blooded egotism that led him now, in the crisis

of the existing domestic complications, to seize with avidity upon those points which could be turned into accusation and reproach against Karslake himself, and thus still further reduce the claims he had upon his consideration.

It was he to whom he was speaking now, in the sharp accentuated tones of intense irritability.

Julian had come down to Ashlands, in obedience to a peremptory summons from Mr. Dorrimore, who, not unreasonably, insisted on a personal explanation of the astounding intelligence that had been conveyed to him, partly by letter, partly by the oral testimony of the two boys, who had been sent home to Ashlands to finish their holidays.

Six weeks had passed since Sybil's flight, and it had been a period of almost intolerable trial to the rector of S. Mark's. All means to

trace her, direct and indirect, short of those of an absolutely professional character, had been employed, but had failed utterly.

It was not only the utter loss and barrenness of his own private life, or the mental and physical exhaustion consequent on the incessant effort and sustained tension of expectation, but the matter could not fail to become a subject of public discussion and private gossip and speculation.

He well knew that in every household in his parish, and far beyond its limit, the question 'What could have induced Mrs. Karslake to run away from her husband?' was untiringly debated. If not a fatal blow to the salutary influence he had acquired, it was a check so decisive that he almost doubted whether Helstone's disclosures could have worked him much more evil.

A man who had so grievously failed in his

own domestic relations was scarcely qualified to regulate and direct the life and conscience of his parishioners ; the world, indeed, had given him credit for somewhat exceptional merit and virtue, but the world, as was so often the way in these cases, must necessarily have been deceived. There was a secret flaw—a skeleton in the cupboard—to account for such a catastrophe.

It was some consolation at this time to his mind, that popular feeling bore more hardly upon him than upon his wife. The fact was, there had always been a certain sweet dignity and obvious loyalty towards her husband in young Mrs. Karslake, that was almost impossible to associate with any slip from conjugal rectitude on her side. True, there were some exceptions to this rule—women who shook their heads, and muttered some common places about ‘ always suspecting those who seemed so

much better and cleverer than their neighbours,' but such remarks were not likely to reach the husband's ears.

What was most hard to bear, was when some respected member of his church called privately upon him, and, pointing out the mischief this scandal was working in the neighbourhood, asked him, with serious kindness, if it were not possible for him to give some personal explanation?

What answer was possible? He could not say his wife had left him to divert from him a disgraceful public disclosure, that would have ruined his character—not from any solicitude about his own personal fate, but because the slightest admission of the kind involved the interests he was pledged to maintain.

As some reply was imperative, he did say on one or two of these occasions that his wife, for whom his love and esteem were unshaken,

had left him under a sense of mistaken duty, but it was quite out of his power to explain the circumstances of the case.

‘Then, my dear Mr. Karslake,’ had been the rejoinder, ‘I fear it will be out of your power to keep your present hold upon your congregation and parish. Your influence for good and general usefulness will be greatly lessened.’

‘In that case,’ he answered, ‘my course will be clear. I am as willing and able now as before to do my duty—or, at least, I believe that I shall be, when I have had a little more time to rally from the effects of this blow. But if my parishioners continue to distrust or reject me, I shall not force myself upon them. I will place my resignation in the hands of the bishop.’

And then, no longer able to resist Mr. Dorrimore’s importunities, he had gone down

to Ashlands to bear the brunt of the father's indignant displeasure.

‘What I want to know,’ repeated Mr. Dorrimore, ‘is neither more nor less than this—what has become of my daughter?’

He had a habit of reiterating what he considered the telling points of his speech, in a way fatal to the patience of an ordinary listener—of varying the form but not the substance of a question, and asserting, with angry insistence, that a straightforward answer was denied him.

The provocations he had already inflicted upon his son-in-law during the interview, would have driven some men to outrage and insult, but apart from a faculty of forbearance which was based in the solid earth of principle, Karslake had necessarily a profound sense of the involuntary injury he had done him, and a noble tolerance for the constitutional infirmities of the man, aggravated by his present distress.

‘If I could tell you that,’ he answered, ‘there would be no question between us. If I knew where Sybil was to be found, I believe I should have no difficulty in inducing her to return to me.’

“Believe—have no difficulty—induce her to return to you,” sneered Mr. Dorrimore, ‘the situation is monstrous! Married little more than a year, and the wife cuts herself adrift from her husband, he professing his helplessness to discover her! In that case, why haven’t you set the detectives to work? Would the shame of a private inquiry-office be greater than this public scandal—that is, if you are in earnest to find her? But it is impossible to understand you! On what ground do you justify the keeping back the truth from me—her father?’

‘So far as I know the truth I have laid it before you, fully recognising your rights in the matter. I have told you I was threatened by Mr.

Helstone with the public disclosure of certain personal circumstances, through which he chose to consider my reputation damaged, and that he consented to withdraw his persecution on the condition that my wife severed the connection between us. She has taken this step simply to save my good name.'

'Heaven and earth!' exclaimed Mr. Dorri-more, wheeling round his chair so as to face the speaker; 'and you are coward and miscreant enough to suffer her to do this thing—to accept the rehabilitation of your worthless, clerical prestige at the cost of her reputation and happiness! For cold-blooded calculating selfishness, commend me to the parson and the saint!'

'Your indignation would be perfectly warrantable if I or any man could be guilty of such baseness,' returned Karslake, with practised self-control; 'but I had no knowledge of her intention until it was fulfilled

--at the cost, you must surely understand, of my happiness as well as her own. I feel bound to add that I had always proposed to face the consequences of Mr. Helstone's action: she, dreading them for my sake, yielded to the cruel pressure he put upon her.'

'And in so doing, to my mind, she gave in her adhesion to Gilbert Helstone's conclusions. The man is no fool, and has plenty of professional experience. Am I to believe, on your assurance alone, that he has trumped up a case with no evidence to support it? or that Sybil, with her clear head, would have run away from you on a charge she utterly rejected? No, no, Julian Karlake; you draw too largely on my credulity. I shall sift this so-called calumny to the bottom.'

'You will, of course, take what steps you think proper under the pain and pressure of the circumstances,' replied Karlake, 'and I

have no means beyond my unsupported assurance to convince you of the truth of my statements or denials.'

He got up and went to the window, to relieve the strain and weariness of the intolerable controversy.

The lawn before him was an unbroken plain of stainless snow, and the overgrown firs and pines had taken to themselves a magical beauty, under the weight of the same burden. The downfall still continued, and was drifting rapidly into fantastic wreaths and banks, according to the direction of the cutting east wind. If matters continued thus, he would soon be snowed in.

The peevish voice of Mr. Dorrimore soon broke the silence.

'Oblige me by sitting down—I cannot talk to a man at the other end of the room! How comes it you have put yourself into the power

of a man like Gilbert Helstone? Rather, how comes it you held back from me the knowledge of those damaging circumstances, able to wreck your reputation? Was it the conduct of a man of honour, let alone one pledged by his calling to special uprightness? I always marvelled why you bid so high for Sybil—is this the explanation?’

His thin lips curled into a sneer as he spoke, and a flush of genuine passion touched his sallow cheek and brow.

‘I am an old man,’ he added, in the low tone of repressed excitement; ‘but, before God, if you have tampered with my girl I will find the way to avenge her! Tell me, if you dare, what was the precise charge against you that your wife could not brook?’

Karslake still kept his place at the window, apparently watching the drifting snow fall, but in reality conscious of nothing but the

increasing desperation of his own position. How was he to escape the legitimate demands of his wife's father? Was he to lose all? He had been bereft of love for the sake of his honour, but no vestige of external honour would be left him. The pitiless insults to which he was subjected stung and cut to the quick his vital sense of dignity and rectitude, but how could he resent or repudiate them—he who laboured under the imputation of a treachery so absolute that the vilest natures would have recoiled from it

If he could have answered—‘I have a brother: ask me no more questions—the mystery and disgrace are his;’ he might have silenced every tongue, and won back his fleeting credit and happiness. But a boyish oath to a dying mother, accepted and confirmed under circumstances of extremest urgency, bound him in infrangible bonds.

‘At all costs’ he had pledged himself to conceal the fact of Harry Karslake’s existence. It was an unlimited obligation, from which there was no escape.

But it was no part of his character to shirk or flinch from any measure of the difficulties which beset him.

He left the window, and came back to the chair opposite Mr. Dorrimore.

‘I acknowledge,’ he said, ‘that you have a right to ask me these questions, and to form conclusions most injurious to myself when I tell you I cannot answer them—dare not, if you choose to put it in that way. The explanation I refuse to give you, I have equally refused to give my wife. I mention this that you may judge how useless it will be to urge me further.’

The old man looked at him steadily. No doubt he misread the sternness and pallor of

the face before him ; the hard composure of tone which was the result of strained self-command seemed to him like the effrontery of guilt.

He pushed back his chair, as if to increase the distance between them. 'Do I need to hear more?' he asked. 'I have forced my girl—my girl, like whom there was not another—on a villain, and she has found it out for herself. Curse you!' he added, with the impotence of senile passion, 'why did you bribe so high that I coerced her inclination? Had I left her alone she would have had nothing to say to you.'

Karslake listened in silence. What was to be gained by contesting this point of accusation or that? On the whole, it was better to receive the full burden of ignominy than to excite suspicion and inquiry by disputing it in detail. Now as before—now as ever, to the end of life,

whenever that might come—he had the courage of his own conscientious approval to support him, and to give such an expression of simple dignity to his aspect as fixed the attention of Mr. Dorrimore.

‘You are a subtle deceiver,’ he said. ‘Even now, when I look at you, I am tempted to doubt if you are as bad as you seem. Still, the idea is untenable that any man would submit to public reprobation, and practically divorce the wife he professes to love, by withholding a personal explanation. I shall see Gilbert Helstone, and learn from him what you refuse to tell.’

‘And when you have done that, your conviction of my guilt will be still more absolute and severe.’

‘If the weather were not so atrocious,’ continued Mr. Dorrimore, ‘I would telegraph to him to-morrow, and give you the opportunity of

confronting and confounding your enemy—if it would be any satisfaction to you.'

'It would be none,' replied Karslake, knowing that as he spoke he was tearing away the last shred of belief held by the other in his favour. 'I might reiterate my denial of Mr. Helstone's conclusions, but I should be utterly unable to disprove them.'

Again Mr. Dorrimore turned his piercing gaze upon him.

'Have you a brother or bosom friend?' he asked sharply. 'I can believe you capable of the despicable folly of sacrificing your own interests for some one else, though even the most Quixotic fool would regard the duty he owed his wife. If I remember right, you told me when you were courting my daughter that you had no blood relation whatever?'

'Your recollection is correct. I did so tell you.'

There was an inflection in the tone not lost on the keen ear of Mr. Dorrimore. He pulled his chair nearer to the other, and seemed to rake his countenance with the relentless keenness of his gaze.

Karslake felt sick at heart : this was becoming one of the critical moments of existence, but he dared not wince beneath the scrutiny. He had spoken in perfect good faith at the time referred to, believing then his brother had lost his life at sea ; but if the question were now to be repeated ?—if it were ?

Almost the last words spoken by the broken, desperate man had been, ‘ You will never own your brother is a living man—renew your promise ! ’ and he had consented to the pledge. Was this last extremity to be forced upon him—his honour to be rooted in the dishonour of a lie ? his fidelity maintained at so stupendous a sacrifice ?

Almost consummate as was his habitual self-command, he found it now impossible to control the working of his face, but the growing darkness of the wintry afternoon was a point in his favour. It baffled the completeness of Mr. Dorrimore's examination.

‘In that case,’ he said, with a cynical little laugh, ‘you must be in the same position now ; and my romantic theory that you were playing the part of sacrificial victim is quashed. I understand you to say you have no brother?’

Hesitation would have been ruin and discovery. Karslake raised his eyes to his inquisitor, and replied quietly :

‘I have no brother.’

As he spoke he felt as though the very shadow of death had passed upon his soul, but he would not have recalled the words had it been possible, nor refused to make the same declaration again

under the same circumstances. It is no figure of speech to say that he would rather have surrendered his life than have been constrained to utter this false denial ; but then it was not his life but his cherished integrity that was demanded of him, and as he judged there was no alternative but submission.

Let casuists dispute the question, but assuredly there are crises in human experience where the sin in ordinary is transmuted into a sacrificial offering.

‘ It would be useless to protract the conversation any longer,’ returned Mr. Dorrimore, with impatient weariness. ‘ Until I have seen Gilbert Helstone I can form no positive conclusion, nor come to any decision. You decline to stay and meet him ? ’

‘ I do ; if possible, I must return to town to-morrow.’

‘ I have no wish to detain you. I shall

adopt my own means for the recovery of my daughter.'

Karslake rose. 'Perhaps,' he said, 'it will be unnecessary for us to meet again? I shall leave by the early train to-morrow, and I will spend the evening with the children.'

'It will not be possible to return by the early train,' returned his host querulously. 'We have not horses or carriages at command, and no woman-servant could go through this snow to order a trap in the village. But, anyhow, we need not meet, whether your departure is fixed for seven or eleven! I will wish you good-bye to-night.'

'Good-bye,' said Julian in response. He hesitated whether he should venture to add any word of the sympathy and regret with which his mind was full, but refrained, feeling sure it would be rejected.

In the hall he paused, as was natural, to

look through the wide portal, through which the snow and now the rising moon gleamed white and lustrous. At the same moment the door opposite the library—the room where he had held his first interview with Sybil, and which was now the children's schoolroom—opened, and the slight childish figure and sweet face of Lucy appeared.

‘We heard you come out from papa,’ she said, ‘and Miss Taylor has sent me to ask if you will not come in and have a cup of tea?’

‘I cannot come in,’ he replied, going to the house door and opening it with a sort of blind instinct, so that the icy air might blow on his throbbing temples. ‘Go back to the warm room,’ he added, seeing that the child shrank back from the chilling draught—‘I am going out for a walk.’

‘Out for a walk! you will lose your way in

the snow. Bertie says it is up to his knees. You must not go out to-night! Besides, you have not got your overcoat on—you would catch your death of cold! Do come in and have some tea!’

She looked up at him pleadingly, with eyes so like her sister's that he turned to her suddenly, caught her in his arms, and kissed her passionately. His self-control was unhinged; a wave of desperate feeling was passing over his mind. The element of the insufferable seemed to have been introduced, by the late cruel incident, into his life, or if it were not absolutely so, his resolution had for the time escaped him, and it would need a sterner conflict than any he had yet known before he should be able to regain possession of it. He felt that solitude and the night air and sky were, under any conditions, absolutely necessary to him.

Still he would not betray himself before the

tender-hearted child. He shut the door and drew back into the hall.

‘I was looking out, Lucy, to see if it were practicable to get to the village to-night, where I have some business to do, and I see that it is. I know the road well, every tree, gate-post, and field between this and Roosden Magna. If you will, you shall help me on with my coat, and then bring me a cup of tea out here.’

Lucy obeyed, springing upon a chair to perform the function better. Then she went back for the tea, watching him drink it as he stood with all a child's unspoken depth of sympathy. She was thinking how changed he looked since she saw him last, when he came to Ashlands at Midsummer to fetch Sybil home ; and with this thought the tears slowly welled into her eyes and began to roll down her cheek.

‘Are you going to look for Sybil?’ she asked. ‘She is not in these parts or we should

have found her ourselves. I wish you would not go out to-night, but come into the school-room and talk to us. You look so tired, and Miss Taylor particularly wants to see you.'

'I will come in, if you are not all gone to bed, when I get back;' and he opened the door and stepped out on the frozen snow.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

‘MAN is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward,’ wrote the Syrian sage in the dim ages of an uncertain antiquity ; and it is an oppressive and almost exhausting consideration that each cycle of the race, and even each unit of the mass, fulfils the dictum in their own experience. And not only are the sorrows of mankind inevitable, but they are as incalculable and diverse as the sands on the sea-shore, or as the myriad individualities which rise, suffer, and pass away from the stage of mortal life.

No one whose experience has been deepest will deny that the irrevocableness of *death*—the pain and loss of bereavement—are not the

heaviest blows of destiny. There is a blessed tendency in human nature to accept the stroke dealt by an unseen Power, and from which reason urges there is no escape; and with such acquiescence peace and resignation are at least possible.

But when the troubles of life assume the guise of capricious injustice, and an arbitrary cruelty of circumstance impossible to evade or neutralise, by action either personal or of others, then do perseverance of purpose and resolution of endurance rise to almost heroic proportions.

To have seen his adored young wife sicken and die would have been doubtless a supreme and terrible experience to Julian Karslake, but it would surely have been more tolerable than the corroding anxiety, the exhausting yearning and despair of his present state.

He had not even the poor satisfaction of knowing that she was safe and well, but was

harassed by fears and misgivings he had no means of allaying, as to the condition to which her magnanimous indiscretion might have reduced the noble, sensitive, and cherished girl. He knew she had taken very little money with her, nor drawn upon her banking account since she had left her home. Where and by what means was she supporting life?

The memory of her tender passion on that last morning before her departure was almost more than his manhood could sustain. It seemed to dissolve his very soul to consider that it was the intensity of her love for him that had given her the strength necessary to sacrifice it to his interests.

His interests—alas, how had she mistaken them ! What public discredit could he not have endured unflinchingly, under the sustaining sense of his own conscientiousness and his wife's loyal trust ? And even if the field of duty had

been closed to him in the open thoroughfares of life, how many wastes and by-paths remained where he might have laboured in willing obscurity.

And all this cruel suffering had been imposed by the vice and selfish exigence of one man, and the vindictive hate of another. He suffered his mind for a time to rest on this consideration, and exhaust its bitterness—it was better to recognise, accept, and vanquish it than blindly shut his eyes to the aggravations of his lot.

How hard that lot was for him—alas! how hard for her—it would have been difficult to estimate; but there was no help for it. His freedom had been compromised from boyhood; the moral obliquity of Harry Karlake had been the curse and burden of his life, exhibiting itself in every action and turn of thought with a hideous consistency.

He had lied and pilfered as a school-boy ; then, in his premature manhood, had squandered his equal fortune on the race-course and betting-ring, and in other worse outlets for riotous living ; had ravished poor Nell of her love and her honour ; and had finally cut himself adrift from society by the commission of a felony against the man who had stood in the position of guardian to both brothers.

Had the fond mother, who had held him to the last in her dying arms, foreseen the evil tendency of the child, and sought to guarantee him, against his own bias, by forcing so reckless a pledge from the elder brother ?

‘You will never forsake Harry,’ she had faltered, as the pale, stricken lad knelt by her side to receive her last commands ; ‘he is so much younger and tenderer than you. Promise me you will always stand by him as long as you

live, and will help him, even at any cost to yourself.'

And Julian had promised, not blindly, but even then with some dim perception that the pledge would involve pain and sacrifice. But what pain and sacrifice would he not have accepted to have been able to soothe the last moments of a mother he adored? The very last words she spoke to him were a repetition of her prayer.

'You remember? you will never forget! You are so much stronger-minded than Harry. You will secure his welfare in preference to your own?'

And he had again answered that he would, and ratified the pledge by an appeal to God at the poor mother's feverish entreaty.

'Now kiss me, Julian!' she had said, as if passively content to sink out of life, now that she had secured a measure of safety for her

favourite son: and he had laid his warm lips upon her chill forehead, as setting a sacred seal upon his bondage, and also as an expression of the unrecognised love which was so silently but profoundly wounded by her wayward indifference to himself.

And from that hour to this his life had been harassed and impoverished by his steady devotion to his promise, not kept only according to the letter, but in the most generous rendering of the spirit of the same.

His character, fine and great in its natural elements, and welded into stronger cohesion by the principles of his creed, acquired from this protracted discipline a power of resolution and endurance which stood him in good stead in the present cruel crisis of his life.

It was his pledge to Harry Karlake, and his abiding fear that the latter would sooner or later bring some public shame upon his family, that

had withheld him from disclosing his love to Sybil Dorrimore, according to ordinary modes and at an earlier period ; and it was not till the report of Harry's death by shipwreck had been abundantly confirmed that Julian felt himself at liberty to ask her in marriage.

Also, at the time that he took this course he was ignorant of the crime that had led to his brother's flight, Mr. Anstruther being absent in America, and his bankers having paid the forged cheque without suspicion ; so that it was not till his return, some months after, that the truth was discovered. But the news of the death of the unworthy young man had reached them before this, and naturally mitigated the wrath of the man he had injured.

‘Only,’ he had said grimly to Julian, as he folded up the felonious scrap of paper, and placed it in the recesses of his pocket-book, ‘I will preserve this as evidence of a fact. Some-

times dead men come back again, and were Harry Karslake now living, he should suffer at my hands to the last extremity of the law.'

Julian had urged, with eager insistence, to be allowed to repay the money of which Mr. Anstruther had been defrauded, but to this the stern old Scotchman would not consent.

'I hold to my own,' he answered, 'and will let no man willingly escape who has wronged me ; but I will not rob you to indemnify myself for your brother's defalcations. You may thank God he is at the bottom of the sea !'

And when the natural horror and magnanimous regret connected with Harry's untimely end had become softened by time, it was impossible for Julian Karslake not to recognise that, for the first time in his life, he was a free man, and to turn gratefully to receive into his large and

tender nature the promise and fruition of Sybil Dorrimore's growing love.

But such blessed sense of freedom was very short-lived. The occasion on which Gilbert Helstone had seen him at the Crystal Palace, with Nell and her child, had been a death blow to his security.

The girl, to whom he had been friend and adviser in all her troubles, had written to him asking him to meet her in some place of secrecy, as she had some very important information to give him. She had fixed the hour and the place, falling back on the precautions her unworthy lover had taught her ; and the news she had to communicate was conveyed in a letter in Harry's well-known handwriting, telling her he had escaped with life from the wreck, but with the loss of everything besides, and bidding her inform Julian that he might send help to his relief, and advise him how best to act.

‘You will remember,’ he wrote, ‘that his old pledge in my favour must now take the form of keeping the secret of my existence from all the world.’

No wonder Gilbert Helstone had read pain and consternation in the face he confronted.

CHAPTER XXXV.

KARSLAKE went back to town the day after his interview with Mr. Dorrimore, and with a distinct programme laid down by himself in regard to the course he should pursue.

He had not come back from his night walk to Roosden Magna in time to fulfil his conditional promise to Lucy, but when he did return he had conquered in the fight against rebellion, surrender, and despair, and had regained possession of his patience and his courage.

One of the first steps he took on his return was to address a circular letter to the most respected and influential members of his church,

requesting them to meet him in the parish schoolroom on the following Tuesday evening, in order that he might make a personal statement. He added that the invitation, though necessarily given directly to a few, was intended to include any parishioner who thought proper to attend.

Before deciding upon a proceeding which he knew to be momentous, Karslake had taken into profound consideration the possibility of revealing the truth of present facts to Mr. Anstruther, and endeavouring to obtain a pardon for his brother, so as to set himself at liberty to wipe out the scandal that threatened to blight his life.

He was no narrow fanatic bent on self-sacrifice, or one who deemed the repression of natural instincts and of earthly joy the highest form of religious duty. On the contrary, his love for his wife, and his appreciation of their

mutual happiness, was as intense and keen a feeling as was possible for youthful manhood to conceive.

The anguish of separation and uncertainty, the proud and painful recoil from public shame and private injustice, were not accepted and endured by him as sacrificial offerings acceptable to God, but simply in the spirit of a soldier who is constrained to meet and suffer the wound from which it would be cowardice to flee. To recover his wife and preserve his good name were aspirations of invincible strength, second only to the one resolve, that neither should be attained by the sacrifice of his brother's safety.

And the disheartening conclusion he reached in regard to the contemplated appeal to Mr. Anstruther was, that it could not be attempted with safety, nor consequently with honour. Apart from vow or oath to dead or

living, he could not purchase his own immunity at the risk of his brother's prosecution and ruin, and it would be this latter which the stern old merchant would be bent on accomplishing. There was nothing for it but to meet the present emergency with what prudence and courage he could.

On the evening appointed by the Rev. Julian Karslake to meet his parishioners, the room was crowded to excess, and a feeling of strong excitement, or perhaps it would be juster to say of intense curiosity, prevailed. In the anxiety to obtain good places, the people had assembled some time before the hour named for the commencement of the proceedings, and the interval was spent in an eager discussion of the situation, in which the ignoble tendency to believe evil far exceeded the divine charity which hesitates to accept it.

When, however, the rector appeared,

punctual to his own arrangement, his personal presence made as usual a diversion in his favour. Every eye followed him as he walked quietly and somewhat slowly up to the little reading-desk, from which he knew he should be expected to speak. He stood for a few moments silently surveying the crowd before him, with the practised sensibility of a public speaker, able to perceive the moral atmosphere by which he is surrounded.

There was not a trace of nervous hurry or excitement about him, and when he spoke the words fell in perfect phrases, and with the faultless purity of accent for which he was distinguished.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘(for I will not venture to call you my friends, lest there should be any amongst you who would repudiate the name), the object for which I have asked you to come here to-night is to help me to form a

decision. It is a decision not so much personal to myself, or I should have needed no advice upon it, as one in which the interests of the parish at large are mainly involved. To be brief, I desire to collect your suffrages as to the expediency or in expediency of my remaining at my post as rector of S. Mark's.'

He paused a moment, for a confused murmur arose in the hall, that conveyed the idea of feeling excited, but left the nature of that feeling uncertain and inarticulate. Presently, however, a voice from one of the back benches said, with that coarseness which oddly enough proverbially characterises such interruptions :

'Come to the point ! We shall know better how to answer when we've heard what you've got to say !'

There was a partial manifestation of displeasure at this abrupt expression of opinion, but as the speaker in point of fact conveyed

the leading sentiment of the majority, the offence was naturally condoned.

‘If,’ resumed Karslake with the same quietness as before, ‘the expectation prevails that I am about to clear up the mystery of my domestic relations, and offer a satisfactory explanation of the fact that I stand alone in your midst, it will be effectually disappointed. On this subject, except the barren assurance that it is the result of circumstances beyond my control, and totally unconnected with any point of moral transgression, I must maintain an absolute silence. Perhaps’—catching the confused buzz of disapprobation—‘it is scarcely necessary for me to go on.’

Some of his more personal friends cheered lustily, but the speaker was quite conscious that the feeling of the meeting was against him. A general impression of disappointment and balked curiosity prevailed; also, if he had

betrayed more emotion he would have excited more sympathy.

‘For the rest,’ he continued, ‘I came to say that I am personally conscious of no disability, moral or otherwise, that should unfit me for the work of my profession. I am not only as anxious now as before to do my duty, but I am equally qualified to do it; that is, I fully recognise all the imperfection and inadequacy of the past, but it does not take the form of making me incapable of the effort of redeeming it in the future.’

It needed no common strength of inward conviction and self-respect to maintain this quiet but dauntless demeanour in the front of an obviously antagonistic assembly, but already it began to tell in his favour, as genuine and simple manifestations of feeling rarely fail to do.

He went on after a moment's hesitation.

‘On the other hand, if your confidence in my integrity and sincerity is shaken, I have decided to resign my living at once. I will only live amongst those who believe at least in my honest endeavour to do right. Where distrust and suspicion existed, labour and devotion, however unstinted, would be lost. It simply rests with you to retain or reject my services.’

He was going to sit down when a thought struck him.

‘I should add that, in deciding this question against me, you will not fatally ruin my worldly prospects, as might be the result in many cases. I believe I should have no great difficulty in finding work elsewhere, and I have private means which, under any circumstances, render me independent of my profession. I mention this that your decision may be unbiassed by any generous consideration for my personal interests.’

Had he spoken from deliberate policy instead of from an impulse of conscientious feeling, he could not more effectually have turned the vibrating scale in his favour.

A ringing cheer echoed through the room ; the manliness and fairness of his last words, the firmness and dignity of his manner throughout, appealed irresistibly to the Englishman's instinctive love of pluck and fair-play. The show of hands seemed to indicate an almost unanimous vote of confidence ; a crowd of his personal friends gathered round him to shake hands, and offer their unqualified adhesion and good-faith ; and so infectious became the enthusiasm of the majority, that each man seemed anxious to constitute himself the representative speaker of the assembly, and to assure the rector, with more or less of exaggeration, that his high regard and confidence had never been shaken.

In the strong excitement of unaccustomed public speaking a great many foolish and extravagant words were uttered, which only served to wound and humiliate the sensitive conscientiousness they were intended to encourage and exalt.

In rising to thank them for the kindness he had received, Karslake disclaimed the excessive tribute they had offered to his worth with the steady conviction of a man whose self-estimate is not affected by the popular voice, and with the sadness of an underlying conviction that it was a matter of chance rather than of right that their present verdict had not been reversed.

As he went slowly down the stairs of the building, having waited till the room was empty before taking his departure, Gilbert Helstone touched him on the arm.

‘ Did you know I was one of your audience?’

he asked, searching the face of the other with his keen vision.

‘I did not, and the fact is a matter of indifference. There is only one point I can bring myself to discuss with you—have you any news of my wife?’

As he raised his eyes and looked steadily at Helstone, his face showed evident traces of the physical waste and exhausting mental disquiet of the last three months. All the bitter pain and passion of bereavement which he had desired and planned to inflict, had been endured, was being endured, with a resolution that extorted his reluctant recognition.

‘Look here, Karslake!’ he said, in a low significant voice, ‘I will remember my debt to you, and pay it back by giving you another chance. Your house is nearest; shall we go there?’

‘The question I have asked you can answer

on the spot. I have no intention to open up any other subject.'

The haughty coldness of his manner brought an angry flush to Helstone's cheek, and deadened the involuntary relenting he had felt.

'You venture too far,' he answered, with a recurrence to his usual tone of sneering insolence ; ' the rôle of injured innocence you have played with so much success upstairs will hardly go down with me. In proposing to intrude upon your privacy just now, I was moved by a touch of sympathy. I have a letter of Sybil Karlake's in my pocket !'

The announcement was so unlooked for that Julian staggered under it for a moment, as if he had received a blow. Then a sort of illumination passed over his face, leaving it paler than before.

'For the love of God,' he ejaculated,

grasping Helstone's arm, 'tell me if she is safe and well!'

Helstone shook himself free roughly: the moment was the climax of his triumph. All that intolerable hunger of the soul which he knew so well from bitter experience, looked out of the intense eager gaze that Karslake fastened upon him: his stern self-repression had yielded as he expected.

'You seem to forget that you declined my overtures just now,' was his reply, 'and I have no mind to renew them. Mrs. Karslake's letter is a strictly private one, that not the most fastidious honour would think it necessary to show to you. For all that, I will satisfy your mind on these points, on one condition.'

'Name it! I must buy at any price the news you have to give—I cannot live without it!'

'Keep to the point, if you please! Once more I offer you the opportunity of explaining the

scandal of the Crystal Palace, and the small house at Stratford-le-Bow. Your persistent obstinacy has almost shaken my belief in the evidence of my own senses. Declare to me fully the paternity of that child, granting you are not responsible for it, and I will consider if we can return upon the old paths.'

'You mean, that you make the giving me tidings of my wife conditional upon my satisfying your mind on this subject? It is scarcely credible you can carry malignity so far!'

Karslake looked at him with such an instinctive expression of moral recoil as brought a sense of shame and discomfiture to Helstone's mind; he passed it off with a harsh laugh.

'That is my meaning precisely, and in making you such an offer I go beyond my original intention. I am fool enough to be touched, not by your misery, which I can well bear, but by hers, which is greater than I

expected. I will put Sybil's letter in your hands, I will even smooth the way to your reunion, but only on the one reasonable condition that you prove to my satisfaction you are not unworthy.'

‘It is a condition impossible to comply with, and which you know to be impossible. In other words, I accept the torture you probably meant from the first to inflict. I spoke rashly when I said I would buy my peace of mind at any price. I thank God I know so much, that Sybil lives! For the rest, I have long since chosen my part in this matter.’

They were not idle nor even tentative words. He turned as he spoke, and walked swiftly out of the building, without giving Helstone the opportunity of reply.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHEN the young rector reached his own house he found a messenger waiting for him. Some child in the neighbourhood had been badly burnt, and the family were in despairing ignorance as to what was best to be done. The parish doctor was absent; the local remedies applied had only aggravated the agonies of the poor little victim, and, as the next alternative, the mother had sent her son to the rectory, to ask if Karslake would come and help them.

All the poor of his parish had an unlimited belief in his faculty of assistance and their right to draw upon it, and no compunction in pressing their claims in a quarter where experience taught them they were seldom rejected.

But on this occasion, after the protracted strain and agitation of the evening, he felt as if he were not sufficiently master of himself to accept this demand upon his firmness ; also he shrank from the sight of the child's sufferings.

‘My boy,’ he said gently, ‘in these cases a great deal of skill and care is wanted—your mother must send her to the hospital.’

He took out his purse with the idea of giving him money, but the boy shook his head.

‘Mother told me to say she didn’t want money, but she won’t send Mattie in there, nothing shall make her ! She made sure you’d come yourself, as you did when Bill broke his leg, and show her what to do. Her screams are dreadful—it ’most drives mother wild !’

Karslake gathered himself together with an effort.

‘I will come almost at once,’ he said ; ‘run home and tell your mother. I will bring

a doctor with me, for I am not surgeon enough for a case like this—we will do all we can.'

He sat up all night with the little suffering creature, for the doctor would not allow her mother to be in the room, as her tears and vain lamentations aggravated the distress of the patient. The child was severely, but not mortally injured, and much depended on keeping her still, handling her gently and diverting her mind if possible from the pain she had to bear.

Julian Karslake possessed that intuitive aptitude for nursing which seems a heaven-born gift, and is sometimes to be found with men, in whose character strength and tenderness are finely balanced, in a degree of perfection scarcely to be paralleled in the other sex.

He sat out the slow hours of the night, for the most part holding at her own desire the child's hand in his, and soothing her with simple, clear, incisive talk on those points where

he thought it possible to excite her interest ; and in default telling her fairy tales with unwearied patience, or responding to her moans and sobs by the incessant application of the prescribed palliatives.

The strain upon his own endurance was great, and was protracted till daylight dawned ; but at last the child slept. The mother, calmed by her night's rest, took his place at her side, and he was at liberty to go home.

When he entered the library he saw that his good housekeeper had been considerate of his comfort. A bright fire burned ; a small table covered with a tempting breakfast stood prepared, and Sybil's little *cafetière* was sending up its fragrant breath above the spirit lamp.

What acute and unconfessed pangs of anguish pierced his soul as he glanced round the familiar scene and handled the objects consecrated by the touch of his lost wife !

He stood by the table and drank a cup of coffee before going up to his dressing-room ; he relied upon his bath and change of dress for righting him after the fatigues of the night, being able as yet to draw largely upon his fine constitution. But any loving eye might have detected the traces that suffering, never more deadly than under strong repression, and habitual loss of sleep, were leaving on his face and figure.

On this occasion, however, he felt so thoroughly exhausted that he threw himself on the couch in his dressing-room and slept for an hour or two, so that the morning was fairly advanced before he came down-stairs again ; and just as he was on the point of sitting down to breakfast, a servant opened the door and ushered Miss Helstone into the room.

‘ Lay the breach of conventional etiquette

upon me, Mr. Karslake,' she said, in her quick decisive manner; 'the man obeyed my orders by showing me in here at once. I was so afraid of missing you—I had no idea you kept such fashionable hours!'

'I am not always so late. May I have the pleasure of giving you a cup of coffee?'

He drew a chair for her towards the fire as he spoke, and offered to relieve her of the ponderous muff and bag she was carrying. Sara looked at him curiously; she had come full of womanly sympathy and indignation in his behalf, having heard from her brother what had passed between them over-night, and was prepared to find him altogether out of gear—pale, dejected, even dishevelled.

The comparative freshness of his appearance and faultlessness of his dress, added to the late luxurious breakfast, did more to cool her ardour and re-awaken the distrust she had

almost dismissed, than the most scathing of Helstone's denunciations.

She declined the cup of coffee stiffly, insisted upon retaining her encumbrances, and sitting down at a considerable distance from the cheerful blaze, begged he would not allow her presence to interrupt him. 'It was surely time he had his breakfast!'

'But I have no appetite to eat now,' he said, rising and going up to her with subdued agitation. 'Have you come to tell me something about Sybil?—he may have shown you the letter. Surely I shall not appeal to your charity in vain!'

Sara was the most impressionable of women. Beneath the pathos of his voice and the expression of pain in his face, her prejudices were melting fast; still there was a certain consistency to be preserved. In her case she thought it ought to take the form of prelimi-

nary austerity, and she set her lips with such rigid firmness, and looked at him with such a stony stare, that the hope he cherished sank within him.

He turned from her, more shaken by the reaction of feeling than he liked to betray, and bowed his head upon his arms, crossed upon the mantel-piece.

She rose up quickly and touched his arm.

‘Come, come,’ she said, ‘cheer up! If I had been minus the blessed grace of charity, I should not have been here this morning. I have seen her letter—nay, do not expect too much; I have not got it with me. Comfort yourself, Mr. Karlake,’ she went on with considerate rapidity, ‘that she is in safe and kind keeping. She says she has met with the most generous of friends, and bids us tell you there is nothing lacking to her outward welfare. She sends her love to you, weighted

with such passionate tenderness that I can't carry the burden. She implores me to write and tell her how you look, how you sleep, how you live. But the burden of her letter is just one prayer to Gilbert, to suffer her to come back to you.'

'And he will refuse to grant her prayer?'

The face he turned towards Sara was haggard enough now to meet her sternest requirements.

'That is not the way in which he puts it; he says the decision rests with yourself. I do not want personally to open this controversy with you, Mr. Karlake. I am well assured from what I have heard that it would be of no use. When you were courting Miss Dorrimore I had a great liking for you, as you perhaps know, and a very high opinion of your merit; but not even an old maid's partiality can with-

stand the force of circumstances. If I don't take for granted all that Gilbert asserts about you, I can't shut my eyes to the fact that there must be more or less of duplicity mixed up in this miserable business.'

She stopped; he had not interrupted her, though his impatience almost amounted to agony.

'Will you tell me where Sybil is?' he then asked.

'We need not debate that point, for it is neither in my power nor Gilbert's. The letter we received had been posted at the General Office, and our answer was to be addressed to the *poste restante* at the same place.'

His eyes kindled. 'Then it will be possible to write to her.'

Sara smiled grimly. 'It would be possible, of course, if you knew the initials under which we are to address her. You see, when a wife

runs away from her husband she uses every precaution to preserve her concealment.'

'I cannot jest,' he said almost sternly. 'I do not suppose you can have any motive for keeping this vital point back from me?'

'I have at least the motive,' she answered sharply, 'of not disobeying the commands of a brother, who can make himself very unpleasant indeed when he is offended, and the further motive that Mrs. Karslake herself is dreadfully afraid of being discovered. But,' she added, looking at him steadily, 'I have not forgotten what you did for us on that dreadful night, and I am going to pay back the debt we owe you. Write to her under the initials of the last three letters of the alphabet, and I suppose your letter will stand the same chance of reaching her as Gilbert's. Now, deserving or undeserving, own that I am as good as a fairy godmother.'

He went to her and kissed her hand ; there

was a brightness and gladness in his expression almost more, she thought, than the occasion justified.

‘ You are my good angel,’ he said. ‘ I ask nothing more.’

‘ And does the mere opportunity of pouring your heart out to your wife bring back so much of the old look to your face? You are an enigma to me! But if what you write should reach the hands of my poor darling, I am content—she prays for news of you as starvation prays for bread. As regards my brother, I shall lie valiantly: your morality seems eccentric—no doubt you hold that there are circumstances in life when a lie becomes justifiable?’

She spoke at hazard, with no knowledge that her question would bear to him a painful personal significance. He answered it, however, without any change of countenance, but with a

grave solemnity that made her again look at him curiously.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I do hold that opinion, under great reserve. The occasion does not come perhaps more than once in a century, nor to one man in a thousand. I should hold you inexcusable for deceiving your brother on this point.’

Sara raised her eyebrows. ‘I like the sternness of your morality—for others! But I will not dispute ethics with you; I will do what you will like much better—I will go away and leave you to write your letter to Mrs. Karlake in peace. I think it should not be delayed.’

‘And will not you relent sufficiently towards me to drink a cup of coffee? It is beginning to snow; you cannot go away just yet.’

He poured it out and brought it to her with so winning a grace that she could not resist it; at least, this was what she said to herself. But,

in truth, it was a grateful relief to her to linger in that pleasant room instead of returning to her own cheerless domicile, and, at the same time, to satisfy her womanly instincts by the close observation of the man who at once attracted and baffled her. That he was inwardly counting the slow progression of time with almost intolerable anxiety, could never have been guessed by the gracious friendliness of his hospitality. He was pleased to be able to induce her to eat, knowing well she had the delicate and capricious appetite of an invalid; and while affecting for her encouragement to do the same, was sensible that the excitement under which he laboured, and the idea of action he had conceived, had effectually destroyed any inclination for food.

At length she took her departure, and he was free to follow his own will. He sat down and wrote his letter at once, more swiftly and

briefly than might have been expected, and then went out immediately to deposit the same in the post office.

At that period, the interior of the General Post Office had not been enclosed ; the central hall was still open at both ends to the streets, and the bureaux of the different departments were ranged on either side, to the right hand and left of the visitor. It requires no long stretch of memory to recall the exact locality of the office in which Karslake was interested.

He deposited his letter, and then took a deliberative walk round the area of the building. His plan was to maintain a strict oversight of every person who approached the *poste restante*, and, at the same time to escape, as much as possible, attracting attention to himself. He had taken the precaution to make the cover of his own letter specially characteristic, so as to be able more readily to detect it when given

into the hands of the applicant, and it was the somewhat desperate hope of witnessing this consummation that was animating his mind with a thousand delicious hopes of advance towards the recovery of his happiness. He had defined his course of action ; he would accost the messengers without hesitation, and extract from them by some means or other the secret of his wife's concealment.

But the office was open from ten A.M. to six P.M. ; it was then about one o'clock. Also, it was just possible he might be too late ; that Sybil had signified to Helstone at what hour his letter should be posted, and that hour might already have passed. The doubt was an overwhelming one, but impossible of solution ; nothing was left but the necessity of keeping watch till the hour of closing.

This, too, was a matter of great difficulty. To patrol the interior of the post office for a

number of consecutive hours—perhaps even for one—would soon make him an object of attention to the police, and ultimately of inquiry and interference. His movements would be less conspicuous were he to pace up and down St. Martin's-le-Grand, in front of the building, and keep a vigilant eye on every one who ascended or descended the broad flight of steps on their way in and out; but to have done this effectually, in the height of the day's pressure of business, would have needed not one pair of eyes but a hundred. Besides, had it been possible to make the espionage absolute and inclusive, there still remained the signal difficulty that those who went in at the principal entrance might possibly go out at the other end of the building, leading into Foster Lane, and thus defeat the very object of his anxiety.

The wisest course seemed a compromise. He would keep the interior of the building as

long as feasible, going outside and making the circuit of it as circumstances seemed to suggest. But as the slow hours dragged, and his anxiety and disappointment deepened in intensity, he finally decided to risk the consequences of his pertinacity, and keep his guard near the department itself.

During the time that had passed there had been only six applications at the panel of the same. Three of them had been young men, evidently foreigners, with something in their appearance that suggested the idea of mercantile clerks, and only two of whom were successful in finding an answer. A fourth was a fashionably-dressed, languid-looking man, who received a pink billet at the window and slipped it into his pocket with a yawn, and the other two were women.

These latter, not being quite sure of the result, Karslake ventured to address, his manner

at once enlisting their sympathy so far as to lead them to a frank exhibition of their respective missives.

Also at this point, perceiving that he had become a mark of attention to the policeman on duty, he thought it best to appeal at once, both to his sagacity as an official and his benevolence as a man, by taking him frankly into his confidence. The result was more successful than he expected. His clerical dress and air of distinction went some way, no doubt; but there was that in his manner and look that made it very difficult to question his veracity. The man shook his head slowly: if he had been a Frenchman he would have expressed the same feeling by a shrug. He committed himself, however, to no more definite expression of opinion than by saying:

‘May be, sir; but this kind of thing could never be allowed—we should have the place

full of 'em ! Leastways, you won't object to my keeping an eye on you.'

But the long day ended in failure, and as the clock struck six Karlake left St. Martin's-le-Grand with a sense of profound disappointment and of almost intolerable fatigue, but resolute to renew the watch on the morrow, from the earliest moment of opening.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AT a quarter before ten on the following morning Karslake was again in St. Martin's-le-Grand.

As he went up the steps of the post office an elderly lady, tall, substantially-dressed, and closely veiled, who preceded him, dropped the umbrella she was carrying.

As he restored it to her, the casual glance one bestows in such circumstances on a stranger, was extended in her case to a lingering gaze of startled inquiry, but her face was too closely muffled for him to be aware of the fact.

Her eyes followed him with keen attention

as he entered the building, and prepared to recommence his weary promenade of observation. As the boom of the great clock sounded the last quarter before the hour, she took out her watch to compare the time, with a little gesture of impatience and shiver of cold that in his turn attracted his attention towards her.

She too began to walk briskly up and down the area.

Suddenly the conviction flashed upon his mind that the clue he sought was found; that the stranger, like himself, was waiting for the opening of the *poste restante*, and that here, in this dignified and reputable personality, was the friend who had granted her generous protection to his wife.

He would, of course, wait to test his impression, though it seemed to possess him with the strength of a conviction, lest any

precipitancy on his part should deprive him of his advantage.

The hour struck, the lady turned quickly and approached the department he was watching, knocked gently at the closed panel, and, after the interchange of a few words with the clerk, received two letters from his hand, one of which Karslake recognised as his own.

She walked briskly away, and was making her way out towards the remoter end of egress from the building, when he intercepted her.

‘Pardon me,’ he said, and there was that in his aspect and voice which was calculated to arrest attention, ‘I am Julian Karslake!’

Miss Harrison was not startled. His face had struck her at first with a sense of familiarity she had vainly tried to trace to its source; now the facts were clear.

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘you are Julian Karslake. I recognise that as a truth, but I do not understand why you make this gratuitous announcement to a stranger.’

‘You hold my letter in your hand—you are going back to my wife. What I ask is that you will give me leave to accompany you.’

He was pale with intense excitement. The concentrated anxiety of the gaze fixed with baffled inquiry upon her veiled face was painful to encounter, but the inward agitation was rigidly kept in check. His external manner was so quiet as to attract no attention from the passer-by, and there was neither hurry nor incoherence in his speech. These circumstances commended him to her favour.

‘Walk by my side,’ she said, ‘and we will talk as we go along.’

She turned her steps in the direction of Cheapside, and began to speak to him in the

midst of the din ; but a Londoner has a practised ear, and as he bent towards her he lost not a single word.

‘ Your wife has been well cared for since the day she left your house. Her first night was passed under my roof, and, though I claim no gratitude from her, I consider you can never be thankful enough.’

‘ You are right,’ he answered quietly ; and though Miss Harrison stopped, as if from the deliberate intention of keeping his anxiety in suspense, he waited patiently without further comment till she thought proper to resume.

When she spoke again it was to ask :

‘ What do you mean to say to your wife, granting that I consent to bring you together?—to humble yourself before her?—to ask her forgiveness?’

His heart so leaped within him at the admission of her words, that he scarcely

perceived what was implied in the secondary inquiries. Miss Harrison repeated them, however, with some variation of phrase.

‘Mind,’ she added, looking at him sharply, ‘I am not judging you by the character given you by Mrs. Karlake, but according to my own knowledge of the world. The knight (or parson), *sans peur et sans reproche*, is a character that has never yet crossed my line of vision, and my experience tells me always to distrust a generous woman’s vindication of her husband. No one will persuade me there is not wrong somewhere, when a girl like Sybil Karlake thinks it her duty to run away from her home!’

‘And has not your experience of life taught you that the wrong and the suffering do not always go together?’

She smiled. ‘So far as my own sex is concerned, yea, verily it hath, but not as regards

yours. However, I will not push you too hard, and where we can scarcely hear each other speak. You will try and persuade Mrs. Karlake to come back to you ?'

'Yes !' he answered, and his face flushed and kindled at the thought of the ineffable compensation.

'Remember ! I will not have her coerced,' said Mrs. Harrison, authoritatively.

'I shall try the full coercion of love and reason ; no other.'

'*Sans peur*, at all events,' she said, as if to herself. Then aloud, 'Nothing is to be gained by keeping you longer in suspense ; will you call a cab for Waterloo station ? I live at Esher, so that you will be face to face with your wife in little more than an hour. You can be the bearer of your own letter,' handing it to him as she spoke. 'This, from her other friend, I will deliver myself, and for the rest

it is too cold and too noisy for further conversation.'

She folded her innumerable wraps close about her, and settled herself as if for sleep, first in a corner of the cab, afterwards of the railway carriage; but her keen eyes never drooped beneath her veil, but kept up their vigilant scrutiny of her travelling companion without rest or fatigue.

Arrived at Esher, she bade Karlake follow her at a little distance.

'Sudden grief is dangerous in its consequences, but sudden joy is possibly worse, in proportion to its intensity; and this foolish young wife of yours adores you. I will prepare her for seeing you.'

She left him standing outside the fence, within a few paces of her garden-gate, while she went swiftly forward and entered the house.

She was not absent more than ten minutes, but it seemed to his sorely-tried patience more than an hour.

‘Come in!’ she said, on joining him, in a voice that shook a little with agitation. ‘You have kept your parole strictly, and deserve to be rewarded. All is well,’ she added, looking up kindly into his pale face; ‘she does not know you are on the spot, but I have prepared her to see you soon, and she has rushed upstairs, whether to compose her mind or adorn her person, I am not quite sure; but the coast is clear for a time, and I can smuggle you into my parlour.’

Karslake grasped her hand in speechless gratitude, and Miss Harrison twinkled the tears from her eyelashes.

‘I have been a man-hater all my life,’ she remarked, ‘but I am inclined to think there may be exceptions to my estimate.’

By this time they had reached the pleasant, cheerful room into which Sybil had been first welcomed, and now, as then, the large, lavishly heaped fire was dispensing warmth and brightness around. A little work-table stood near, from which it appeared someone had precipitately risen, for the embroidery silks were scattered on the floor, as well as a little volume which Karslake immediately recognised as belonging to his wife. He stooped instinctively, and gathered all up with tender reverence, scarcely able to forbear pressing his lips to the covers of the familiar book.

Meanwhile, Miss Harrison was hospitably intent on producing wine and biscuits from an old-fashioned cellarette.

‘Drink this!’ she said, ‘it will not hurt you, even at this time of the morning. It is priceless Madeira, though I say it who shouldn’t, and has made more than its one voyage to the Cape;’

and she handed him a generous bumper of the pale golden fluid.

Karslake, as a rule, never touched wine, but he would scarcely have refused a glass of poison from the hands of their benefactress, or have returned an ungracious denial to her kindly hospitality.

He took the glass with thanks, sipped it critically, and praised it with discrimination, while every sense was on the strain to catch some sound in the house that might indicate his wife's presence or approach.

‘Will you not let her know I am here now?’ he asked at last, ‘or is it possible for me to go to her? You need not fear I shall lose my self-command.’

‘I hear her step at this moment,’ said Miss Harrison; ‘she is coming down-stairs. I will trust to your discretion, and leave you to receive her alone.’

She rose with secret reluctance as she spoke, for, in fact, she had a strong desire to be a witness of their meeting, a desire which was unexpectedly to be gratified.

As Karslake opened the door for her departure, Sybil had laid her hand upon it from without, and the two thus stood immediately face to face.

There was a moment's breathless pause, during which the eyes of each searched the face of the other with a brief glance of passionate inquiry as to the effects of absence. Then, with a swift, gliding motion, graceful as a swallow's flight, Sybil flung herself upon his breast, clasping her slender arms about his neck, and lifting her pale, tender face to meet the kisses he pressed upon it.

She looked so white and seemed so speechless that Karslake, fearing she would faint, took her in his arms and placed her in Miss

Harrison's huge cushioned chair, close to the fire, kneeling at her feet and chafing her cold hands in his. He forbore to overwhelm her with his caresses, or to urge her to give him the dear delight of hearing the sound of her voice ; but the very intensity of her emotion, by showing him how much she had suffered, quickened his own feelings almost to agony, and made him resolve, with renewed energy of purpose, that no earthly power should part them again.

He was going to rise to fetch a little wine from the table, and induce her to taste a few drops, but she retained him by a movement of her trembling hands.

‘ Do not move ! Do not leave me ! ’ she murmured ; and then a sudden and unusual passion of tears burst from her eyes and shook her with convulsive sobs, but brought her at the same time a qualified relief.

Karslake held her in his arms, soothing and caressing her with quiet tenderness, till the paroxysm had subsided, and she was able to lift up her bowed head and look at him.

‘Julian,’ she said, pausing on the name as if to exhaust its sweetness, ‘I have lived a lifetime since we parted last ! How could I leave you ?—say, you have suffered too ?’

‘I could not say ; I have never dared to ask my own heart how much I have suffered.’

She gazed at him with some return to the sweet gravity of her ordinary expression.

‘And yet now that I see how pale and worn you look, I wish I could have borne my suffering alone. But one question—you understood why I left you ? You never doubted—were never angry with the step I took ?’

‘Never, never ! I always accepted it as the proof of the highest devotion, Sybil, on your part, of which, on mine, I was little worthy.

But for all that, beloved wife, it is a sacrifice that has run its course.'

'Is it so?' she asked. The fine carmine tint peculiar to her moments of deepest excitement tinged her cheek, and a gleam almost amounting to rapture shone in her eyes. 'Is Gilbert Helstone's malice exhausted? But you would not have come to me otherwise—it would have been too cruel a mockery.'

'To come to you with any other idea than to hold you for ever in the future, would indeed have been too cruel a mockery for either of us,' he answered with a tender smile, 'but I own I have not taken into account the state of Mr. Helstone's feelings. Believe that there is but one thing in the world—the secret pledge by which I am bound—to which my love and duty to you would yield. So far, dearest, this has not been required of me. For the rest,

there is no disgrace so absolute, no social ruin too shameful, that I would not endure rather than your loss. Life will never be too hard for me so long as I have the approval of my own conscience, and the blessed encouragement of your hand in mine.'

His face kindled as he spoke ; she drew a heavy sigh.

'I don't feel quite as you do. I cannot be so brave and self-sufficient for you as you are for yourself. Shame and ruin are words I cannot bear in connection with your name ; but we will leave that an open question for the present. Sit down now, and tell me all that has happened to you since I went away.'

He obeyed, relating to her what incidents had occurred with perfect accuracy, but saying little or nothing of the feelings which had been involved. Two points also he suppressed—the scene with Helstone's maniac-mother, and the

denial given to Mr. Dorrimore's question. Here, he judged, that even to her silence and secrecy were best. '

‘How much you have had to bear,’ she answered, when he had finished his story, ‘while I have been sheltered from every annoyance from without ! One wishes sometimes it were possible to gauge sensation. I have a foolish desire to know that you have felt my loss with the same ceaseless, corroding pain as I yours ; your mind has been diverted by so many serious anxieties. There are new lines, or at least deeper lines, on your face than when I kissed you farewell on that sad morning—a look of sternness I never remember before—’

‘Because I have lacked the tender spell of your influence and sweet example. Without you I should grow cold and hard, still doing my routine duty, but in a mechanical and worthless way. Never leave me any more,

Sybil, for there have been moments—hours, rather—during your absence when I have been almost tempted to curse God and die. I have a task to fulfil to which flesh and blood seem at times unequal. Put away for ever from your mind the notion that you can help me otherwise than by standing with me hand to hand in the struggle.'

He suddenly took her in his arms, and strained her against his breast with a passionate abandonment almost unknown to her before.

'Promise me,' he urged, 'that nothing but death shall part us henceforth?'

At this moment Miss Harrison's loud, cheery voice was heard approaching the room, and the next she knocked at the door, and entered without much pause for permission.

'I am come to tell you,' she said, approaching the fire and breaking the huge blocks of coal with a vigorous hand, so as to give the

young couple the opportunity of recovering their composure, had they lost it, 'that dinner is ready. Not lunch, Mr. Karslake, but dinner in all sincerity, at two o'clock in the day. Also, the only summons recognised in this household is when the hands of the clock point precisely to that hour, as they do now. Sybil, my dear, I hope your husband has brought back the appetite you have lost so long!'

'I think we are both desperately hungry,' said Sybil, casting a look of covert entreaty towards Julian, for she knew her good hostess's weak point. As they went from one room to another, she managed to whisper :

'For the sake of all I owe her, try to eat her dinner and praise her wine!'

In actual experience the interlude of dinner was a salutary relief to all. Miss Harrison's cuisine was simple, but excellent, and she was one of the most lively and influ-

ential of hostesses ; it was almost impossible to resist the vigour of her hospitality, and the infection of her example. Karslake found, greatly to his satisfaction, that he was able to respond to her cordiality with much less difficulty than he had expected, and fairly to justify his wife's assertion. The truth was, he was not himself aware how long a time had elapsed since he had eaten a substantial meal, nor how far this unrecognised physical exhaustion served to exalt and intensify his mental condition.

At present, at all events, we are all closely beset and sorely harassed by our corporeal substance, and our heated brains cool and disordered pulses throb more equably under the healthy stimulus of recruited powers, than under the urgency of the most strenuous moral endeavour.

Miss Harrison, with her keen perceptive instinct, reached pretty accurately the facts of

the case, reduced them in her own mind to the opinion that both husband and wife were sacrificing their health and happiness equally to some ethical chimera, and purposed to have it out with them both in the quiet, restful, comfortable hours between dinner and tea.

Surely, considering the part she had played in the little drama, she was entitled to their confidence.

With this purpose in view, as soon as dinner was over, she led the way back to her favourite sitting-room, establishing Karslake in a chair almost as ample and luxurious as her own, and suggesting that Sybil should take the ottoman at his feet.

‘In my opinion it is a reversal of the natural order of things,’ she said, smiling, ‘but for the present, at least, men are our only masters and legislators; and I am afraid the best women amongst us still love to have it so.’

‘If I am in any way a docile and obedient

wife,' answered Sybil, caressing the hand she held, 'it is against the bias of my nature. I have been subdued by the abstinence from all authority and the sweet suggestiveness of example.'

'My dear child, as a sister woman I must protest against such palpable flattery, all the more as I see, from the coolness with which it is accepted, that Mr. Karslake is used to the incense and thinks it his due. But we will have done with banter, for I am anxious to come to business and satisfy my curiosity on some important points.'

'And I,' replied Karslake quickly, 'am still more anxious to hear under what circumstances you first met my wife, and how my debt of gratitude to you began. I have not as yet even attempted to thank you. It is useless to make the attempt—words are not adequate to express what we owe you.'

‘So be it ; I am quite willing to allow you owe me a great deal, but this goodness of mine has been its own reward. I have found a friend and companion in Mrs. Karlake, pleasanter and dearer than a long life had given me before ; and now, I suppose, in recognition of my services, you will propose to rob me of her society, without compunction ? ’

‘Not without compunction, but none the less I must take her away. You will find your happiness in restoring ours, only it will be something deeper and fuller than mere restoration.’

He bent over his wife as he spoke, as if these last words were only meant for her private ear ; and there was something in the juxtaposition and expression of the two beautiful faces, with the mutual interchange of candid and steadfast glance, that touched Miss Harrison’s sensibility very acutely.

Who that looked at the man could believe him hypocrite or impostor?

‘I wish,’ she said, ‘if we are to be, as I devoutly hope, friends for the future, you would trust me with the story of your separation. Mrs. Karlake has always been reserved on the causes that led to such a result, and they exist in my mind in a very vague and phantasmal form. I should like to hear a coherent statement of them from yourself. I conclude they exist no longer, as there now seems no question in her mind about the duty and practicability of returning to her home.’

Sybil looked distressed; all the serene sweetness of her face, so marked a few moments before, yielded at once to an expression of trouble and unrest. Karlake, on his part, answered with unmoved composure.

‘You are mistaken. Nothing has happened to change the absolute position of our affairs,

only I hope my wife has given up the protection of my good name at the cost of our happiness : rather I shall take effectual means to prevent the repetition of the sacrifice. As for the story itself, it is perplexed and wearisome, and one it is hardly possible to tell myself, unless my doing so is to be the proof of my gratitude and the condition of your friendship.'

'Precisely,' responded Miss Harrison, whose curiosity refused to be longer balked. 'It is scarcely fair to take my good-will captive, as you have done, without letting me judge for myself how far you are entitled to it. Trust me with all the details of this formidable accusation ; let there be no gaps or omissions in the narrative, and then perhaps the judgment and advice of a clear-headed woman may not be without value to you.'

She drew in her chair as she spoke, with too obvious a manifestation of zest and atten

tion, which only served to deepen in Karlake's mind the almost insuperable reluctance he felt to enter upon the disclosure of his most secret private affairs with a stranger, however importunate or worthy.

At that moment, and with a grateful sense of relief, he heard the door-bell ring. His hostess heard it too, but with a feeling of strong disappointment and annoyance.

‘Few as are my friends,’ she said sharply, ‘and scarce their visits, I always remark that they pitch invariably upon the hour and the day when I least wish to see them! But whom have we here, Martha?’ she added, taking a card from the tray which the servant, who had at that moment entered the room, handed to her with the awkwardness of an unusual formality.

There were a few words in pencil written on the card below the name. Miss Harrison

read them deliberately, and then glanced involuntarily towards her guests.

‘There is nothing to be done but to show the gentleman in here,’ she said to the woman, and then in a lower tone to Sybil, ‘My dear, we have played our part but badly in this pretty comedy. Your poor little letter, with all our clever precautions, has brought both your correspondents upon us.’

She threw the card into her lap as she spoke, and at the same moment Martha reopened the door, and admitted Gilbert Helstone.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

To explain the appearance of Gilbert Helstone on the scene, it will be necessary to go back a little. Mrs. Karslake had endured the long anguish of her suffering till the pain had become insupportable.

She had once told Gilbert Helstone, in the days of her early gratitude and friendship, that she had not much capacity for heroic endurance, and possibly she was right in her estimate of self. At least she had not the energy of her husband's resolution ; but it also must be admitted that she had not the same paramount inducements.

The thought of the pain and grief she must have inflicted augmented her own a thousand-

fold. How would they tell upon the sensitive and finely-balanced organisation she had learnt to watch and analyse with so delicate and acute a perception? How long was this unreasonable martyrdom to be exacted from each?

And not this alone. Was she to submit to an indefinite separation from all the members of her family, in whom her strong and tenacious love was so strongly bound up? Was she to inflict the pang of vain regret and tender yearning upon each beloved little one, whose face brightened at the very mention of her name; and upon the lonely, uncheered father to whom she owed so much? What must have been the cruel dilemma in which she had placed Julian when Mr. Dorrimore questioned him on her behalf? what the childish despair of the nursery in the old house at Ashlands, when they were told she was lost to them, no one knew how?

Was it conceivable that the man who had been her life-long friend before marriage—her mother's kinsman—could determine in cold blood to protract this misery?

Surely, whatever his thirst for vengeance it must be allayed by this time, in view of the sufferings he had inflicted: possibly he only waited for her to make an appeal. And under the influence of this condition of mind she wrote the letter of which we have heard, in which she simply stated the fact that to keep the pledge Gilbert Helstone had required of her had become too hard a task any longer to sustain, and implored him to suffer her to return to her husband and her family without any prejudice to Julian's interests.

There was at once so searching a pathos and so passionate an appeal in what she wrote, that it moved Helstone to the core of his being. But how was he moved? See him crush the

letter in his strong hands and press it—scarcely conscious of the instinctive action—against the lips that worked convulsively. His whole frame vibrated with the thrill of his silent, intense, and jealous passion. What would he give for the tithe of the love she had lavished on this other man? This other man, if possibly not so worthless as he thought him, at least fathoms below the estimate in which his wife held him!

She, the cold, proud and reticent girl, who had been so reluctant to yield her heart, had finally surrendered it, as he always knew she would, with an abandonment that was nothing short of absolute. She could not live without him!

His beauty of person, his grace of manner, his subtlety of character, had subjugated and befooled the woman, who would have been for ever blind to his own single-hearted devotion.

But she should not go back to him—at least, not without the step being followed by the postponed exposure of the guilt and contumacy of the husband she adored.

It was under the excitement and pressure of these feelings that Helstone had gone to the meeting which Karlake had summoned in the schoolroom, moved by the scarcely acknowledged intention of subjecting him anew to his deliberate judgment, or rather to his embittered scrutiny and criticism; but neither love nor hate could entirely destroy his faculty of reason and perception, and there was that in the complete self-command and impregnable dignity of the sorely-tried man that told unwillingly but irresistibly upon his mind.

It led to the half advance we have related already; the determined rejection of which on Karlake's part had served to fan into a fiercer

flame than before the embers that were beginning to smoulder.

He had been a fool to doubt the evidence of his own senses for a moment. Karslake's last refusal under so supreme an inducement to clear his character, was alone sufficient evidence of guilt, if all that had gone before had failed in conclusiveness.

Never, had he power to prevent it, should Sybil return to her husband; better any pressure of present suffering to the shame and dishonour of such a reunion.

He would save her in spite of herself!

The next morning, unable to fix his mind to work, Helstone had conceived the idea of going to Stratford, and questioning, without any restraints of honour and decency, the woman whom Karslake's infamy exalted into a rival of his fond and infatuated wife. Her own simplicity of nature and her mistaken impression that he

was a friend of her seducer would, he thought, make such a proceeding practicable and remunerative. He had seen her more than once since his first intrusion upon her privacy, owing to his desire to preserve relations with her that might be turned to account in the future, but a sense of honourable feeling had hitherto withheld him from forcing any explanation from her.

To-day he did not mean to be so squeamish. Under his guarded professional cross-examination, she should make such admissions as should silence at once and for ever the effrontery of Karslake's perjury, and the irksome intercession of his wife.

He went, taking some trifling present for the boy, but was disappointed in finding only him and the childish little maid-servant in the house. The mistress was gone out, the latter explained, but she did not know where, or how

long she was likely to be absent, and he failed to extract any further information from her.

He sat down in the meagre little parlour, with some idea of waiting for Nell's return, and passively suffered the child to chatter to him. By nature he was a generous lover of children, but this special child excited an instinctive aversion he made no effort to overcome or conceal; the beauty of his person and the artless grace of his speech and gestures, being so many points of vicarious condemnation and recoil.

He could not bring himself to entrap the unconscious boy into disclosures or communications, but he listened with a sort of saturnine disgust to his innocent prattle, in which occurred constant references, not to Karslake's name indeed, but to circumstances and actions which he felt morally convinced could be connected with no one else; and the profound antagonism was strengthened every time Harry

raised his beautiful, large-lidded blue eyes to his face, or excited his contemptuous comparison by some sudden movement of body or turn of phrase.

Then a curious little incident occurred, that seemed to Helstone almost a fore-ordained interposition of Providence.

Harry was very eager to show him a new picture book he had lately received, and which, from prudential considerations, had been put out of his reach on the top of a nondescript piece of furniture that the boy called a 'what-not.' In clambering up to reach his treasure, he knocked down a heap of books that had been piled insecurely on the top of his own.

Helstone, with an involuntary movement of good-nature, rose and went to the spot to help him to repair his blunder. In so doing he could not help perceiving that one of the scattered volumes was a Bible, which had fallen in such a

way as to expose the fly leaves to view, and that on one of these was an entry in Nell Trevelyan's handwriting, which he recognised at once as identical with that which he had seen on the covers of Harry's small library.

He took it up and read it with breathless eagerness, for his keen casual glance had shown him of what stupendous importance to his purpose it was likely to prove.

It was such a memorandum of domestic incident, as the worthy heads of families were wont to make within the covers of their Scriptures ; but in this case, alas ! it was a mother who was no wife who had penned the humiliating entry.

It ran thus :—

‘ *Aug. 10, 18—.* My beloved little son was born.’

‘ *Aug. 30, 18—.* He was baptised, *unknown to him*, Julian Harry Karslake, at S. Pancras

Church. In this way I have given him the name that ought to be mine, but is not.'

It was signed 'Nell Trevelyan,' and the memorandum was blotted, perhaps with tears.

Helstone grasped the book, and looked round to see how his little companion was engaged. The boy was intent upon his new picture book, with his back towards him.

Swiftly and deftly, making no sound, but with a face ghastly with agitation, he cut out the leaf from the volume and conveyed it into his pocket.

What more did he want? Had not Heaven itself placed conviction in his power—conviction that would close the question of reunion for ever?

He strode out of the house, with his brain on fire.

Sybil divorced and possible of attainment—that was the deadly lure that led him on.

But he was premature in saying this was proo

enough. He would add yet one more point of damning evidence ; he would go to S. Pancras' Church and search the register, and then ?

He devoured the distance between him and this new goal by calling a hansom and paying the man munificently for extra speed. Again Heaven or fortune seemed to favour him. The church was open for a wedding concluded, and he had no difficulty in inducing the clergyman, who was then taking off his surplice in the vestry, to allow him to search the baptismal register under the plea of professional investigation, presenting his card at the same time as pledge of his good faith.

The Vicar himself assisted his search, and being certain of his date, now more than five years ago, the page was easily found, and the confirmation he desired stood before his eyes.

‘*Aug. 30, 18—.* Julian Harry Karslake ; Nell Trevelyan. Stratford-le-Bow.’

Helstone involuntarily covered his eyes with his hand, lest he should betray too much to the casual observation of his companion. It was a relief to his overwrought feelings that the Vicar went on talking.

‘My parish,’ he said, ‘is almost beyond all bounds of absolute knowledge, and at my monthly baptismal services you would be astonished at the crowd of children brought in. Although I know quite well that many of them are not parishioners of mine, I ask no questions ; it is a principle with me to turn no child from the font. Would you like a copy of the register ?’

Helstone could scarcely command his voice to reply with sufficient composure. He was overwhelmed, not only with the completeness of his own success, but with a deeper feeling of indignation and loathing against the matchless baseness of Karslake’s treachery. Would

Sybil be able to bear up against the overthrow of her passionate and magnanimous trust?

He roused himself, and taking out of his purse a five pound note, presented it to the Vicar in exchange for the copy he had completed.

‘For your poor,’ he said. ‘You have done a service to-day to the cause of religion and justice that I cannot sufficiently acknowledge.’

He went back to the Temple, and sat down to collect his thoughts and arrange his plan of action. At that same hour his sister was with Karslake, and he was rejoicing in the measure of relief she had brought him. Truly there was no magnetic rapport between them. Helstone took slowly out of his pocket the profits of his morning’s work, and read both documents over and over again. Then he made careful copies of each, and consigned them, with the originals, to different receptacles in his pocket-book. Next he took out Sybil’s letter and spread it

before him. He read a few lines, and then folding his arms over the paper bowed his head upon them.

There were tears of love and rage and pity in his eyes ; a paroxysm of abortive fury shook him from head to foot.

He himself so helpless to comfort or soothe the despair and grief of the woman he adored : this detected and remorseless villain endowed with limitless power to crush her life and honour and happiness under his feet !

Would any amount of shame or ruin satisfy his vengeance—anything short of the murderous instincts he felt springing into energy within him ?

But it is enough to indicate, not to exhaust, the conflict of his spirit. When he came to a decision it was this—to reply to Mrs. Karslake's letter by begging her to appoint an interview with him, in order to receive an important

communication he had to make, and which could only be conveyed to her verbally. 'On this hung,' he wrote, 'the question of reunion with her husband.'

He despatched this letter to the *poste restante* by his clerk, and, in point of fact, Karlake saw the same deposited, though of course without any faculty of recognition.

Helstone further resolved to abstain from any decisive action until he had heard from or possibly seen Sybil. On reading over her letter again he noticed a point that had hitherto escaped him—that she stated she should not send for a reply till the second day after its receipt. Then the obvious idea occurred to his mind, as it had done to that of Karlake, to watch the post for himself, and try to discover and waylay the messenger.

He carried it out on the following morning,

with less promptitude than Julian ; but he was sufficiently in time to see Miss Harrison turn away from the office with letters in her hand, to observe Karslake approach and speak to her, and to follow on their track.

There was no difficulty in doing this. They were neither bent on haste nor concealment, and had no suspicion of being watched. To call a cab and fee the man to follow theirs was easily accomplished. He took his place in the same train, without having come into contact with them, but thought it unwise to get out at Esher as they did. He went on to the next station, and waited for the up train to take him back again, employing the interval in a consideration and reconsideration of his plan of action. A revenge, fuller and richer than he had ever dared to contemplate, was within reach, and he would utilise it to the utmost.

The precautions we have mentioned, and the slight difficulty Helstone had in tracing Miss Harrison's house at Esher, brought him to the point of time at which he made his unexpected entrance into her sitting-room.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

As Gilbert Helstone advanced courteously into the room Sybil rose instinctively from her seat, but not before he had marked the attitude of tender familiarity with a pang of jealous and indignant rage.

‘Madam,’ he said, addressing Miss Harrison, ‘I can only excuse the liberty of my intrusion by explaining at once that, as Mrs. Karslake’s relative and best friend, I am come to thank you for your friendship and protection, and to beg of you not to withdraw them at present ; nor to hand her over to her husband’s care until you have allowed me to make you acquainted with the facts of the case.’

Miss Harrison bowed a little stiffly, but there was an undeniable air of good faith in his manner that produced its effect, and she also did not fail to perceive the expression of pain and dread in Sybil's eyes, and the sudden sternness of aspect that had banished the softness and sweetness from Karslake's face.

The little drama was more thrilling and intricate than she expected, and was to be played out without reserve. All the points of the case which had baffled her curiosity and distressed her genuine benevolence, were to be cleared up, and she would be invited to assume the tempting characters of umpire and judge.

‘Sit down, Mr. Helstone,’ she replied; ‘the circumstances of our connection here are so unusual, that we must all waive conventional formalities. But, before we go further, you must allow me to ask Mrs. Karslake if she recognises you in the character of protector and friend?’

Helstone looked intently at Sybil.

‘It is scarcely possible,’ he said, ‘that she can repudiate a regard that has been hers and her family’s since her infancy, and that never was more surely tried than now, when I have to choose for her between her welfare and her dishonour.’

‘It is true,’ replied Sybil, ‘that I have known Mr. Helstone all my life, and that he has been very good to me in the past, before my marriage. But it is unnecessary to go so slowly over the ground ; you know my story, dear friend : this is the man through whom I was compelled to leave my husband, and who has already found us out to try and force us asunder again. All friendship between us is over. I do not know whether I hate or fear him most.’

Her face kindled as she spoke, letting her proud indignant glance fall on Helstone’s face. Then she drew back a few steps, so as to place

herself beside her husband, and drew his arm around her, holding his hand firmly clasped in her own ; he rather submitting than responding to the action. Helstone could hardly repress a groan of indignant pain.

‘My dear,’ said Miss Harrison, ‘that you have the most implicit faith in your husband I do know perfectly well, and love enough to suffer on his behalf as few women are able to suffer. But you forget you have never told me the details of the accusation against him, and the grounds on which Mr. Helstone sustains them. Mr. Karslake was on the point of supplying this information when we were interrupted. Shall we hear first the plaintiff, and then the defendant in his own vindication, of the sufficiency of which I feel no doubt?’

‘Mr. Helstone has his brief ready, let him read it,’ answered Karslake, in a hard cold tone.

‘ You are right ; I have my brief ready, for I distrust my own power of self-command, and wish to guard myself against running into protest and abuse. Here,’ drawing out a written document from his pocket, and preparing to loosen the tape that bound it, ‘ is a careful statement of the guilt of which I accuse the Rev. Julian Karlake, and the evidence by which I support it—such as, with a little important addenda, I should be prepared to read in the Divorce Court to-morrow. Shall I hand you the document ? ’

Miss Harrison coloured and hesitated.

‘ A lawyer’s brief is professionally illegible, and I should prefer the assistance of my ears rather than my eyes, only it is scarcely reasonable to subject Mr. and Mrs. Karlake to the painful reiteration of what they know already. Will you like to go back into the dining-room while Mr. Helstone puts me in possession

of the details?' she asked, turning towards them.

'Will you?' said Julian, addressing Sybil in a tone to which all the depth and sweetness had returned.

'I will do as you think best,' was the answer.

'Then we will remain. I have heard from Mr. Helstone's lips much of the protest and abuse against which he finds it so hard to guard himself. A calm and deliberate statement is entitled to respectful attention.'

He spoke coldly, but with both pride and bitterness carefully restrained, and Helstone clenched his teeth as if to keep in the savage curse that rose to his lips. To see his enemy stand there, still maintaining his integrity and believed in by his wife—encircling her with his arm as if she were some inalienable possession, and defying him to do his worst—cost him a struggle

to maintain his composure which resulted in the greatest triumph of self-control he had ever known.

But this time Karslake's overthrow could not be avoided.

‘Then I have the permission of all the company to proceed?’ he remarked.

Miss Harrison nodded, and by force of habit took up her knitting, but she soon let it drop into her lap, absorbed in the interest of the recital.

It was a simple and telling narrative of facts, without comment or deduction.

Helstone began with the first introduction of Karslake to the Dorrimore family, recording Sybil's original, and, as it seemed, instinctive, repugnance to his proposals, and the means by which this difficulty had been overcome. He remarked upon his own distrust of the excellencies with which the young clergyman was

credited, and mentioned the unsuccessful attempt he had made to induce Sybil to reconsider the engagement.

He then proceeded to a judicial statement of the incident at the Crystal Palace, which, if he put more strongly than facts warranted, it was equally true he reproduced according to his own impressions.

At this point Miss Harrison looked intently at Julian, with the hope of catching his eye, trusting to the keenness of her faculty of penetration; but he was listening with a fixed, set expression, and his gaze on the ground. She felt she learnt nothing by her scrutiny; at the pain and suffering, mixed with an indignant pride, in Sybil's face she dared not look.

Helstone read on. He had woven all the details connected with the case into a consecutive narrative. His different interviews of

expostulation with Karslake ; the latter's refusal of all explanation, and his uncertain and evasive denials of guilt ; his own vain attempt to break the match ; his successful discovery of Nell Trevelyan, and the night scene at the child's sick-bed. The way in which he rendered all that had passed on this occasion—the observation made by the visiting surgeon to Karslake, as to his relation to the child, and the reply he had given ; his inability to meet Helstone's reproaches, and his subsequent personal appeal in the Temple, when he found that his accuser was bent on exposing him, seemed to clinch the argument without appeal.

Here Helstone paused and looked about him, which he had not done before. He had brought his written statement to a close, but he still held in his hands, unsuspected, a power of conviction and ruin to which all this, stringent as it was, was only introductory.

‘These are the grounds,’ he continued, quietly addressing Miss Harrison, ‘on which I ventured to separate Mrs. Karslake from her husband. I believed him then, as I believe him now, guilty of the basest immorality and treachery, and that it was a stain on any woman’s honour to continue to live with him. I own I should personally have preferred his public disgrace, but I yielded this point to his wife’s magnanimous entreaty. Have you anything to say, any question to ask, or shall I go on to the end?’

‘Is not this the end? Does not this bring matters to the point where I first made Mrs. Karslake’s acquaintance?’

‘Three months have passed since then,’ said Helstone, ‘and brought with them such additional proofs of the allegations I have laid before you that no jury in England will resist, and which so augment the baseness of his guilt

as to set me at liberty to cancel the promise I made his wife, under an imperfect knowledge of the truth.'

Sybil uttered a low cry as of intolerable pain. Karslake drew her closer towards him. Miss Harrison turned to watch them, and met the full expression of his eyes.

'I cannot believe it,' she exclaimed impulsively. 'It would be Satan disguised as an angel of light! But more than that, I trust my instincts. It is not true—Mr. Karslake, say that it is not true!'

'No,' he answered firmly, 'it is not true. But I blame none for believing it, not even Mr. Helstone.'

Helstone's face grew almost livid with suppressed feeling; this assumption of generosity was scarcely to be endured.

'I am not surprised,' he said, in a low harsh voice, that trembled with the weight of his

restrained indignation, 'that a generous woman like you, naturally susceptible to external impressions, should believe in Mr. Karslake. There have been moments when the perfection of his hypocrisy has even made me hesitate, but no such moments can return ! There was a brief period when I considered the possibility of condonation, or rather when I doubted all that I have as yet disclosed, and contemplated the idea of permitting their reunion ; but chance has prevented such a monstrous mistake. An enemy is biassed by his prejudice : the burning facts you already know might conceivably be explained away ; but neither friend nor wife, nor his own stupendous faculty of lying, can resist the demonstration held in these scraps of paper.'

He rose as he spoke, took out his pocket-book with a hand that shook with eagerness, and handed to Miss Harrison the copies of

Nell's pathetic memorandum and the baptismal register.

Moved by uncontrollable anxiety, Sybil pressed forward to her side and looked over her shoulder. As she read, Helstone's gaze dwelt upon her face with an almost devouring sense of mingled passion and pity, watching the slow recession of every trace of colour from cheek and lip, and the convulsive working of the muscles round the delicate mouth, as she stood motionless, with her eyes fastened on the paper, slowly, in a mute agony, gathering the full meaning of its contents.

He made a movement to approach her nearer, fearing she would faint, but this seemed to bring back her failing strength and restore her faculty of speech.

'Is this a forgery?' she demanded. 'Julian, what answer have you to give to this?'

There was such a ring of misery in her voice, such despair in the eyes she turned towards him as cut the sympathetic heart of her friend to the quick, and excited a feeling of impatient anger in her mind towards Karlake, who had not advanced a single step in order to possess himself of the intelligence on which his fate seemed to hang, or swerved for a moment from the stern composure he had preserved throughout.

‘Look at these,’ she said with asperity, holding them towards him as she spoke, ‘and then comfort her if you can!’

He took them almost mechanically. He had no conception of their nature or contents, and he seemed to withdraw his eyes with difficulty from his wife’s pale and changed face. He knew that of the three that watched him, there was not now even one whose faith in his honour was unshaken.

There was a profound hush of intense suspense, as he at length seemed to gather himself together and cast his eyes upon these new evidences against him.

‘I do not understand,’ he said, looking across at Helstone, and meeting the scornful repugnance of his glance with the same unflinching steadfastness. ‘These memoranda are in your handwriting—what do they mean?’

‘The originals are here,’ he answered; and as he spoke he held them open under Sybil’s eyes. ‘This, in Nell Trevelyan’s own handwriting, I tore out of her Bible yesterday; the other is a copy of the baptismal register of S. Pancras’ Church, given me by the Vicar himself. There will not be the slightest difficulty in testing their validity. Are they sufficient?’ his voice broke with the weight of his triumph. ‘You have audaciously denied the evidence of the child’s likeness to his father;

you can scarcely repudiate that of the name with which the nameless mother has endowed him !’

Karslake crossed the room and caught Sybil in his arms.

‘Are you a man,’ he said in a voice that shook with indignation, ‘and can torture a woman’s heart like this? Sybil, speak! tell me you believe in me still. And yet, I see I ask for the impossible.’

She made an effort to answer, but failed, and there was a movement as if she would have withdrawn herself from his arms. He placed her in the great cushioned chair near which they were standing, and turned again towards Helstone.

‘Will you let me see the originals of those papers?’ he asked. ‘You are afraid to trust them in my hands? I shall be quite satisfied to look at them in yours.’

Helstone flung them contemptuously on the table. Karslake took them up and examined them carefully, then laid them down again with a firm hand.

‘It is enough,’ he said, looking towards Helstone. ‘I exonerate you from any deliberate malignity in this matter—you could reach no other conclusion. Sybil, what would you wish me to do?’

He leaned over the back of her chair as he spoke, and was moved to lay his hand on the head bowed in her trembling hands, but he forbore. Miss Harrison watched him with acute attention.

‘I would have you keep my heart from breaking, not from wounded love only, but from intolerable shame,’ answered Sybil, with a sudden rally of her firmness, and turning round so as to face him, with her wet and pallid cheeks and distended eyes. ‘If there is still possibility

of belief left to me, I command you to explain and give me back my honour. To whom on the face of God's earth do you owe the duty you owe to me?'

'I cannot answer,' he said; 'spare me, Sybil!'

'Have you spared me?' she asked, in a tone of passionate reproach. 'You forced my love from me against my will. I married you in defiance of a doubt no other woman's faith would have sustained, and against which I have struggled up to this hour, but even my fond credulity can go no further. Inasmuch as I have loved you utterly, and believed in you even against the evidence of my own senses, so do I now wholly repudiate you. If it is possible to break the tie that has tempted you to this extremity of treachery I will do so.' She rose and faced him as she spoke, her weakness dominated by her indignant scorn

‘It will be quite possible,’ was his answer. ‘Mr. Helstone will be at hand to instruct you how to act. To sever your life from mine is now as much my duty and desire as it can be yours. Such as I am should stand alone.’

He went up to Miss Harrison.

‘You are a good woman,’ he continued, in the same tone of quiet but unshaken resolution, ‘and will not, I think, refuse to help a man, even as disgraced and unhappy as myself. If I should need some friendly help in the settlement of my affairs in the future, may I dare to apply to you?’

Miss Harrison made a gesture of assent; her voice just then was not under command.

‘For the rest,’ he continued, and for a moment he paused and covered his face with his hands, but it was rather from the instinctive desire to shut out the ruthless eyes that watched him, than from any lapse of firmness; ‘for

the rest,' he resumed, 'I wish my wife to understand that I still maintain my integrity in this matter, and hold myself as worthy of her love now as in any past time. I simply give up a struggle that has become too hard for me ; but right rests sometimes with those who lose all else.'

Helstone, who was watching Sybil intently, saw her shrink and tremble from the proud erectness she had assumed ; saw the lips quiver that had so lately regained their firmness, and the scintillation of her glance soften beneath the glaze of sudden tears.

'Who is torturing a woman's heart now?' he muttered. 'Your acting is excellent, as always ; but spare us, spare her, at least, any more last words. If your integrity is still so absolute, you will have the chance of proving it in court.'

'I shall never make the attempt. You

may depend upon success, for judgment will go by default ; but you are right otherwise.'

He hesitated, looking at Sybil with a grave, yearning intensity, infinitely more pathetic than the wildest outburst of passion. Then he went up to her and took both her hands in his.

'I may at least say farewell, and wish you the happiness of swift forgetfulness, my wife, my love.'

He strained his lips upon the hands that lay passively in his, made a gesture of adieu to Miss Harrison, and turned from the room.

There was a dead pause for the moment after his departure. They heard, in the breathless stillness, the house door open and shut upon him, and then Sybil, who had still retained her attitude of resolute dignity, relapsed, and uttering his name with a cry of passionate appeal, sank fainting into Miss Harrison's arms.

‘It is better thus,’ said the kind woman, yielding now to the tears restrained with so much difficulty. ‘Carry her to the sofa, and don’t let us be in a hurry to bring her back to her misery.’

CHAPTER XL.

It has been well said that in all strong and masculine natures there is a reactionary tendency, in the extreme crises of human sorrow; at the point where weakness and selfishness would not only touch the condition of despair, but rest in it, these receive a recoil towards energy and resistance.

As Julian Karslake sat in his desolated home, and forecast his future, he acknowledged the prospect to be as barren and hopeless personally as could well be conceived.

He had not only lost the wife he adored, and with her a measure of blessedness such as few men taste in their conjugal relations, but he

was the object of indignant reprobation to the woman who had proved herself capable of the highest magnanimity. His allegiance to one claim of fidelity had thrown discredit on every other action of his life.

The commonest instincts of loyalty and honour—nay, of truth and decency—he was held to have outraged, to a degree that went beyond the ordinary manifestations of moral obliquity.

Nor was his position one of mere mental distress and difficulty. It touched his public life and credit at every point. Whether his wife carried her wrongs into the Divorce Court or not, the circumstances which led to their separation would soon be noised abroad, or rather systematically spread by Gilbert Helstone.

The little world in which he moved would be invited to share the knowledge of his infamy, and to swell the chorus of condemnation

and disgust. There was not a hand that had clasped his, not an eye that had regarded him with favour, that would not now be withdrawn or averted.

He would be regarded with that special contempt which is reserved for those who have shamelessly betrayed a cause to which their fidelity has been voluntarily pledged. At his hands the creed he had maintained and the principles he had advocated, would suffer incalculable wrong, while the power of retrieval would be lost to him.

He must not only resign his living, but every other professional avenue of usefulness would be closed to him.

He had thought at one period of his life of offering himself for missionary service in India, and the idea had occurred to him again during his late anxieties, but that was now out of the question.

His character and career would not sustain the necessary investigation. Missionary societies do not send out men whose wives have abandoned them on the gravest accusations.

If in the future he was to do any work for either God or man, it must be beyond the close fold within which he had hitherto been not only member but shepherd.

Nothing tests the spiritual vigour of a man like the hard necessity of standing up against the deliberate and conscientious condemnation of his fellows, of being forced to rest wholly upon the strength derived from the testimony of his own moral sense. Julian Karslake by constitutional bias was by no means a stoic; he possessed the large receptive capacities of a nature which, although strong, is also sensitive and tender. He had, in a word, that fine susceptibility to suffering, without which patience and endurance become a mere mechanical exercise.

As the slow hours and days fulfilled their course, it must be acknowledged that he felt at times as if the burden laid upon him was greater than he could bear, and also the question would often arise as to whether he should continue to bear it; and this not out of consideration to his own ruined condition, but because the interests and happiness of another were bound up in his life.

But the hesitation was brief and the conclusion absolute. That Sybil should suffer so cruelly through her connection with himself, was indeed the sharpest pang in all his complex misery, but it was the outcome of events the occurrence of which it had been impossible to foresee, and for which it would therefore be unreasonable to hold himself responsible.

The piteous entanglement of circumstances apparently blind, contrary, and inexplicable, is part of the daily burden of poor humanity; but

at the same time it has no power to relax the stringent claims of duty. The one subject that occupied Karslake's attention in these gloomy days, was the consideration of what it behoved him to do under all conditions of his situation, and the best way of doing it.

In thinking of his wife he tried to believe that she was young enough and buoyant enough, to rally from the blow she had received, helped by the potent aid of her wounded love and pride and honour. She had loved and married with a certain reluctance, and when the acuteness of her disappointment had subsided might possibly accept with tranquillity a return to her former mode of life. He thanked Heaven that her strong family ties remained to console and interest her; he tried to thank Heaven that a nature so chivalrous and high-minded as hers, would scornfully repudiate the idea of spending life

in one long wail over a lost love basely betrayed ; but here he was scarcely successful. Nor, when he allowed his mind to rest upon the intense and tender passion she had manifested in so many crises of their mutual relations, was he much more successful in consoling himself with the belief of the evanescent nature of her love. But he would not suffer his mind to rest upon these points : had he done so, his resolution must have collapsed, and that resolution had now taken definite form.

Within the last two days he had received a letter from his brother, under elaborate precautions of concealment. It announced his safe arrival at Auckland, and contained a demand for money to such a considerable amount as exceeded even Karslake's practised estimate of his rapacity. He stated that this time he had accomplished the voyage in safety, and that, moreover, the good luck that had so long

deserted him seemed to be turning tide in his favour. He had found an unprecedented opening for making a fortune, if only Julian would do the right thing by him. He had negotiated the purchase of a store at Auckland, and enclosed a list of goods he desired to have sent out to him from England, besides the further amount of hard cash which would be necessary to clinch the bargain. His brother's ignorance of business need be no obstacle; any broker would manage the matter for him. He further instructed him to consider his request in the light of his future respectability, not to mention the oath that bound him, and warned him against suffering any paltry reluctance to part with the necessary funds, to stand between him and such a result.

He went on to inform him he had adopted a disguise well-nigh perfect; had stained his fair hair and skin, thereby only anticipating the

action of a tropical sun, and grown a superb beard, which he privately considered was an additional point of beauty. 'You know,' he wrote, 'that without contradiction we are both consumedly handsome men,' and wound up his letter by devoutly believing that if fortune and Julian did their duty by him he should do well yet, and settle down as a respectable colonial citizen and the father of a family.

And this was the man for whose sake the sacrifice of all that made life desirable, had been exacted from him !

But the letter suggested a line of action, and supplied the definite scheme and motive of which he was in quest. He would leave England and follow his brother to New Zealand. He would accept implicitly and to the bitter end the charge of those interests to which he was pledged beyond redemption, and at the given cost of every personal satisfaction.

And having formed this determination he lost no time in taking the necessary steps to carry it out.

He placed his resignation in the hands of the bishop at once, simply stating that personal circumstances rendered it impossible for him to remain any longer in the responsible position of a clergyman of the Church of England, and that his decision was final.

He also stated that he had already appointed a curate in charge, till his lordship should make a fresh nomination.

This letter produced as he expected a kindly remonstrance, written under the impression that he offered his resignation from conscientious scruples arising out of theological doubts or difficulties, and recommending him to weigh the matter well before deciding on so important a step, and to give the bishop himself the satisfaction of a personal interview

‘We cannot afford to lose such men as you,’ he wrote, ‘without an affectionate struggle to retain them.’

It did not consort with Karslake's views to allow this idea to remain uncorrected. He accepted the invitation to Fulham, and there explained to the kindly but sagacious old man that he was not influenced by any such intellectual difficulties as he imagined; that his religious beliefs were the same as of old, but that a stigma rested on his private character, out of his power to remove, but which rendered his continuance in office a moral impossibility.

‘More than this,’ he added, ‘I do not desire to say, and since my resignation is already in your lordship's hands, more than this I feel sure you will not demand.’

The bishop encountered the steadfast, level glance of the speaker, and paused in his reply. Presently he said :

‘Our official connection may be broken, but I may still speak to you as friend to friend, or rather, considering the difference of age between us, as father to son. If this stigma is undeserved, and of that I feel pretty sure, there must be some way found of righting the wrong.’

‘There is no such way,’ was the answer, ‘or I should have found it for myself. But your goodness encourages me to ask one thing—if the details of the accusations against me should ever reach your ears, recall to your recollection what has passed between us this day, and let it induce your lordship to withhold, or at least to mitigate, the judgment you would otherwise pronounce.’

This matter concluded, nothing more was left to do but certain monetary arrangements.

There was the painful necessity of seeing

Nell Trevelyan again, and making final arrangements for her comfort and decent maintenance.

That by so doing he was only confirming the case against himself was no point of haughty or defiant indifference, but he regarded it as part and parcel of the work set before him.

His plan was to invest a certain sum in buying her a small annuity, which seemed to him the only adequate way of securing one so thriftless and inconsiderate against want and fraud; though, again, there was a serious drawback in the consideration that such an arrangement could not be effected without forcing their mutual relations into further publicity.

Having instructed his lawyer on the business, and put matters in train, so far as was possible, he went to Stratford to fulfil his last duties to the woman and child, who indirectly were the cause of all his misfortunes.

It was no part of his intention to discuss with Nell Trevelyan the memorandum of which Helstone had possessed himself, or to question her respecting the baptism of her child ; the idea had at one time been present to his mind of asking her what had induced her to bestow his name upon her offspring, and to expostulate with her on the point, but he abandoned it. What good would it do ? She was moved, no doubt, by a feeling of gratitude that it would be heartless to reprove, and there was no opportunity of retrieval in her power.

The interview between them was protracted and painful, for the announcement that he was going to leave the country, and was come to bid her farewell, produced such a paroxysm of hysterical and unrestrained grief on her part as sorely tried both his sympathy and his patience. He could hardly induce her to listen to the arrangements that he had made for her welfare,

for she was one of those women who lack entirely all practical capacity for the affairs of life, and who seem to think that the reiterated announcement 'that they have no head for business,' exonerates them from every obligation to personal exertion.

Another part of his duty was to impress upon her mind the necessity of keeping the secret of her lover's existence, and to this injunction he added another, that she should be faithful to the vows they had exchanged.

'Marriage, at present,' he said, 'is impossible, but it is an object, Nell, I shall always keep in view. Try and redeem the past by the future, so far as is in your power, and preserve at least your motherhood sacred and unstained. Don't fancy that your responsibility to your child is less because you are not wife as well as mother—to my mind, that makes his claims upon you doubly strong. I don't want to preach to you,'

he added, smiling kindly down upon the weeping girl, 'but if I am able to send for you to New Zealand, promise me you will not be ashamed to come.'

'Could you not take me with you now?' she asked, with that mixture of simplicity and ignorance which had been in part her undoing. 'Harry could not resist me when he saw me, especially when I brought our darling to him, stronger and prettier than ever. Then you could marry us yourself, you see!'

'That is not practicable,' he answered quietly. 'You must be content to wait till I know Harry's mind on the subject, though I grant it is very hard advice to give. I have thought, too, it would be better for you to leave this neighbourhood, but would not decide without consulting you on the subject.'

'You are too kind, as always!' sobbed Nell, and she would have snatched his hand

and covered it with her kisses and her tears, had he not prevented her with a feeling almost akin to hardness.

‘Harry’s health is delicate,’ he continued, ‘and sea-air would no doubt do him good. Would you like to live at Hastings? I have friends there who would be willing to receive you as a friend, and where you would enjoy the advantage of pleasant society and kindly advice, should you need it. They would explain, or even manage for you those little pecuniary matters you find so difficult. Also, you will have better opportunities there for sending Harry to school, which is becoming necessary.’

Hitherto she had been all softness and docility, but her feeling for her child was intense, like that of an animal for its young, and in these last words of Karslake she fancied there was a threat of deprivation, of which she stood in secret fear. Her tears ceased

suddenly ; she looked up with a flash of indignation.

‘ Why is it necessary ?—he is the best of boys ! Perhaps you would like to take him from me ? ’

Such an idea had indeed occurred to Karslake’s mind, for he had already perceived in the child manifestations of self-will and perversity, which painfully recalled the father’s characteristics, as well as the lack of firmness and discretion in the mother ; but he had rejected it as bearing too hard upon her.

‘ Not at present, Nell,’ he said gently, ‘ and at no time should I ever have the right or the power to do so ; only, as he grows older, you will very likely see the necessity yourself of putting Harry into firmer hands than yours. I shall always be willing to help you in any way I can. I will let you know where to write to me, as soon as I know myself.’

He sighed involuntarily, and got up to go ; it was all very dreary work.

‘ Your beautiful wife goes with you, I suppose ? ’ said Nell. ‘ I wonder you care to leave England, still it is natural that you should wish to follow Harry. Remember, I shall count the time till I hear from you. You will plead for me with Harry ? ’

‘ I will do my best,’ he answered, and then, after a few more necessary arrangements, he went away.

That, too, was done.

It must not be supposed that in the distribution of his funds and his care for others, the interests of his wife and her family were forgotten.

A fresh deed of settlement was prepared, raising her jointure from three hundred to five hundred pounds per annum, which was precisely one-third of his private

income, and what he estimated was an equitable division of the same, weighed against his other complex claims. Also, he left at her absolute disposal, either to sell or to hold, the costly furniture and art-treasures of the rectory house. No communication was to be made to her on the subject until he had left England. He had already discharged all the servants at his home except the housekeeper, who had begged to remain with him to the last, and a favourite man-servant, who was willing to accompany him to New Zealand. His own outfit was prepared, he had selected the books and personal effects he meant to take with him, and then finally, with a reluctance that was nothing short of martyrdom, he secured his passage in one of the Orient Line steamers, which was to leave the London Docks within the next fortnight.

Before doing this he had obtained from

his lawyer an introduction to a respectable ship-broker, not indeed with the intention of following out his brother's instructions on the spot, but with the view of establishing a correspondence in the future, should it seem to him, on personal investigation, that it was desirable or expedient to do so.

Then came the time when there was nothing left for him to do but to wait with what patience he had at command for the hour of exile ; and dreary and arduous as his labours of preparation had been, this period of enforced leisure was infinitely worse. In the day he could still busy himself in certain unostentatious work amongst the poorest of his parishioners, whose troubles he consoled and whose wants he satisfied or anticipated, without betraying to them what he thought the unnecessary information of his imminent departure. But when night came, and he sat alone in the

deserted silent house, in the apartment so full of tender memories, physically weary perhaps, but with heart and brain oppressed with eager vitality, that was the time to test his courage and his constancy.

At such seasons it seemed as if there were scarcely a tender word Sybil had spoken, or a gracious act that she had done (and were not all her actions gracious, with a charm of delicate and gifted womanhood possessed by no other?) that his aching and almost reluctant memory did not pass in accurate review.

The yearning 'for the touch of a vanished hand' that has loosed its hold of humanity, the hopeless anguish of 'remembered kisses after death,' are more tolerable than that restless hunger of the soul for what it has lost indeed, but not through the dark passage into the region of the unattainable. The recollection, too, of the rapture of delight

and tenderness that had marked their brief reunion, only served to exalt and deepen the bitterness of the contrast which that same day had presented.

The eyes that had met his, dissolved in passionate effusion, were the same that had glowed and kindled with such energy of scorn ; the hands which had clasped his own and held him to her bosom in the very ecstasy of welcome, were those which, an hour later, had lain passive and unresponsive within his despairing hold, even in the supreme moment of a last farewell.

More, all the sweet respect and loving recognition of their short wedded life, were cancelled by the scathing words in which she had proclaimed her loss of faith.

Could he have retained her esteem, though love and possession had been denied him, his fate would have been tolerable in comparison ;

but the draught offered to his lips was of such unqualified bitterness !

At moments so crucial as these there was nothing to be done but to break the thread of despairing reminiscence by forcing himself into such occupation as required mental concentration, or on the other hand to relax the strain of endurance, and passively suffer the full tide of suffering to flow over his soul.

CHAPTER XLI.

HELSTONE'S triumph was complete. He had beaten his enemy at every point, and driven him finally, not only from his wife and his profession—from the tender dalliance of love and social ease, and the honour and good-will of men—but even from his native land.

As a parishioner of S. Mark's he could not but know what was going on. The resignation of Julian's living, the changes in his household, and his imminent departure, were of course part and parcel of public report. Also, Mr. Karlake's housekeeper was intimate with Miss Helstone's parlour-maid, and naturally communicated all she knew of her master's proceedings so far as

they came under her notice. It would have hurt very considerably the legitimate pride of Julian could he have known how closely he was watched by his servants, how much they guessed of what he thought he never betrayed, and how such irritating minutiae drifted back to the ear of his cynical and ruthless foe.

But happily for us these things we do not know.

Once or twice they had met in the streets, although so complete was the way in which Karlake ignored him, or so great was his pre-occupation, that Helstone was not quite sure of being recognised. As usual, there was something in Julian's aspect that inflamed his irritation against him. He looked pale and worn, it is true, but there was nothing of the abasement of mien Helstone had expected and desired to produce. His gait was as erect, his glance as clear and steadfast, the lines of lip and brow as

firm and resolute as ever. If there was less of sweetness there was more of dignity in his face.

Again the idea flashed across his mind, 'Can it be possible I am making a mistake after all?' but he dismissed it instantly. The evidence was too conclusive, and his own discomfiture would have been too absolute. Only, he would have given much not to have owed his own life to the courage and coolness of the man.

He had not failed to notice the scar on Karslake's hand, even in the full tide of his triumph under Miss Harrison's roof, and for a moment it had arrested the words on his lips, and almost made him halt in his purpose.

True, he had conquered the feeling as a womanish sensibility, but all the same the remembrance of that deadly struggle, which must have been mortal but for Julian's interference,

brought a confused sensation of pain and shame to his conscience. At least it would inevitably keep the incident green in Karslake's mind, and must mix an element of contempt with his hatred of his persecutor not pleasant to consider.

Another point that vexed him was the absence of all cordiality towards himself on the part of Miss Harrison.

He had gone again to her house a few days after the bitter scene of exposure and separation he had effected, to inquire after Mrs. Karslake's health, and also to sound her friend, as the more practical woman of the two, as to the propriety of taking the necessary steps to bring the case into the Divorce Court, with as little delay as possible.

Sybil he did not see at all. 'She was not ill, but averse to company,' was the answer Miss Harrison gave him; and on introducing the

other object of his visit, he was both astonished and indignant to discover that both women had cooled considerably towards the idea.

‘If my poor young friend should seriously incline to take this step, of course she will consult you at once; but at present her mind is not at all made up on the subject. I think you may rest satisfied, Mr. Helstone, with what you have already done.’

‘Would you have had me do less?’ he asked harshly.

‘I am not quite sure,’ she answered. ‘You see, she believed in him implicitly and was happy, and so it seems he was with her. I am talking now as a woman of the world, not as a moralist. What good did it do to rake up this miserable story, the chief events of which occurred, if I have mastered your statement, not only before his marriage, but even before he ever saw his present wife? As for telling

me you act in the interests of truth and virtue, I am scarcely simple enough to believe that : you are gratifying a personal enmity.'

'I should almost have thought,' he said sarcastically, 'that you had passed the impressive age that would find Karslake's good looks and good manners powerful above truth and right.'

'And who says I am influenced by them? Though let me tell you a woman is never too old to appreciate the absence of the same, nor to resent a reminder that she begins to take rank with the patriarchs. Moreover, I am not so positive as you that we are on the right tack after all. Your facts seem conclusive enough, but many a man has been hanged unjustly on circumstantial evidence without a flaw.

'In that view of the case,' he answered, 'you will probably lend your influence to induce

Mrs. Karslake to return to her husband and share his exile !’

He spoke with such concentrated bitterness that Miss Harrison looked at him with renewed suspicion.

‘Exile !’ she repeated quietly ; ‘what do you mean ?’

‘I mean that Julian Karslake himself accepts his conviction. He has resigned his living, and ships for New Zealand next week.’

Miss Harrison remained silent, but her warm heart went out in a tender effusion of sympathy towards the unhappy wife.

As soon as Helstone was gone, she sent up a message to her, begging her to come downstairs. She did not follow her strong inclination and go to her herself, for she knew Sybil objected to any intrusion, however friendly, on the privacy of her own room.

‘I will come immediately,’ said Sybil, in

reply to the servant, but she still sat for some time longer in the same chair, as if lacking energy to move.

Her friend had said she was not ill, nor, as yet, had mental suffering undermined the strength of her superb physical organisation ; but the pallor of her cheek, the dark circles round the sleepless eyes, the drawn lines of the mouth and brow, indicated a condition to which pain and sickness could have given little additional weight.

At first, the struggle in her mind had been on the ground of her own self-contempt ; she could not forgive herself for clinging with such passionate tenacity to the love bestowed upon one so unworthy. At any cost to her human weakness, she must cease to love him.

Vain and abortive decision. Her pusillanimous heart refused to yield to the mandate of her outraged honour. After she had summed

up all the mass of evidence against him, retraced with despairing accuracy every detail of Helstone's succinct and formidable statement, and her reason pronounced for absolute and implacable condemnation, she still found herself dwelling with tender ingenuity on contrary and extenuating circumstances, and clinging against hope to the hope that he might yet be innocent.

It was such measureless and incomprehensible baseness! This was one point by which she held.

But yet, again, what conceivable complication of circumstances, other than a common guilt, could induce a man to stand in such close and intimate relations as had undeniably subsisted between her husband and Nell Trevelyan? or a woman with deliberate intention to endow her child with his name, unless she had a melancholy right to do so—a right, indeed, she

had specifically claimed? And, insufferable as was the recollection, had not her own shrinking eyes borne witness to the fact?

Then, on the other hand, she would recal. the unfaltering constancy and consistency with which he had asserted his blamelessness, and the silent argument of his fair and self-forgetful life: and thus the weary round of mental conflict went on.

She had taken off his miniature, and thrown it in the recesses of her box; but what did that avail when every night, after her door was locked against intrusion, she would kneel beside it, draw forth the locket from its concealment, and fix her weary, drooping eyes in stern contemplation upon it. To put it back again with the same proud forbearance, without one pressure against lips or bosom, cost her a struggle, but hitherto the struggle had been successful.

When she went down-stairs at last, in

obedience to her friend's summons, she found her in her accustomed chair with her perpetual knitting in her hand. There was something very restful to the unhappy girl in this quiet, homely position of things. She sat down opposite to her.

‘Mr. Helstone has been here,’ she said; ‘please tell me all he said.’

‘It is for that purpose I have sent for you, my dear; you would wish me to be quite frank?’

Sybil's heart sank within her—what further disclosures awaited her? It was with difficulty she made a gesture of assent.

Miss Harrison had dropped a stitch, and was busy in recovering it; the truth was, she dreaded to launch the news she had to tell at her pale, stricken companion.

‘You will not, I think, be much surprised to hear,’ she began at length, ‘that Mr. Karlake

intends to give up his living? ' and as there was no reply, nor any sign of special agitation, she added rapidly, with an abruptness that was characteristic :

‘ Mr. Helstone says he has made arrangements to leave the country and go to New Zealand ; but that, of course, requires confirmation.’

‘ And he and you consider this as a tacit confession of his guilt ? ’

The voice was so strained and unnatural, that Miss Harrison threw aside her knitting, and looked at Sybil with her keen but sympathising glance.

‘ I do not think it conclusive either one way or the other, but I have a strong inclination to see Mr. Karslake again, and take upon myself to dissuade him from adopting such extreme measures. It would do no good, I dare say—I do not expect that—but

it would be a satisfaction to my mind to have the chance of making observations and drawing conclusions once more. Have I your permission ?'

Sybil could not speak, but she stretched out her hand and clasped that of her friend.

'Then we will consider that matter settled. Ideas and suggestions have occurred to my mind that were naturally smothered under the weight of Mr. Helstone's clinching arguments, and the sad excitement of it all. Face to face with your husband, I think I could probe his sincerity to the quick, or at least my manipulation would be different to the manipulation of your other friend. Mind, I do not say I doubt his guilt, for the assertion seems unwarranted in the face of the evidence we have; but I incline to believe in the existence of some very extenuating circumstances.'

Sybil raised her head with an imperious

gesture ; a flash of fire lighted up her heavy eyes.

‘None such could exist for me. If he is not absolutely innocent, he is absolutely guilty. There is no measure or degree of extenuation possible.’

‘Well, well,’ said Miss Harrison smiling ; ‘forgive my having accredited you with any relenting softness. I will take care of your dignity. I will go to town after dinner.’

When she was dressed for departure, she came to kiss Sybil and bid her good-bye. It grieved her kind heart to see the attitude of passive dejection in which she was sitting, and the absence of any attempt at employment. It had not been thus even in the first days of their friendship, when the pang of separation was at its freshest and keenest. But then the corrosive anguish of injurious wrong had been lacking.

Sybil looked up and read her thoughts in her face.

‘Yes,’ she answered, ‘you must have a little longer patience with me. I shall rally in the end, so far as to resume work and take up my old home interests. But at present I cannot work, or read, or scarcely think—I can only suffer. I would have laid down my life to preserve his honour: now that I have been taught he is without honour, my life seems only a burden to me. But that will pass!’

‘My poor darling!’ replied Miss Harrison tenderly, but Sybil interrupted her:

‘Don’t give me credit for too much tenderness. It is not only that my love lies bleeding’—with an attempt at a smile—‘but my pride is cruelly hurt at having been duped, and deceived, and led blindfold by that irresistible appearance of goodness. Conceive what the humiliation must be, to have poured all my being at his

feet without shame or reserve, because he was so pure and so high-minded, and to discover that no woman was ever more basely cheated and betrayed !’

‘I grant it all, my dearest girl ; the wrong would be so matchless that one doubts the possibility. In this case there is a very stiff *if*, in my opinion, which I am bent on putting to the test to-day. Keep up the fire and wait tea for me. You have no message, of course ?’

‘None !’ but she threw her arms round her friend’s neck, and strained her against her bosom with passionate emotion.

‘God bless you,’ she whispered, ‘and reward you for all the mercy you have shown to me !’

CHAPTER XLII.

MISS HARRISON made her way direct to S. Mark's Rectory, having taken her instructions from Mrs. Karslake, and there met with a considerable disappointment. The master of the house was not at home.

‘I will wait,’ she said. ‘When do you expect him?’

‘He dines at half-past seven; he will not be home probably before then.’

She hesitated, inwardly anathematising his late hours. But could she return to the girl she had left in her agony at home, and not have seen him?

She was introduced into the library, that

being the only room where there was a fire burning, and for some time she was fully occupied in making observations upon all that surrounded her.

And this was the home that each was abandoning ! this the position of cultured ease he was giving up—for what ?

While she was revolving this question impatiently in her mind, she heard the welcome sound of a latch key being applied to the street door. None but the master of the house would be likely to avail himself of this privilege ; after all, she should not keep Sybil waiting for her return so long as she feared.

A moment after the door of the room where she sat opened, and Julian came in.

Miss Harrison had risen and advanced to meet him, kindly solicitous to lessen the surprise or even the shock her unexpected presence might produce ; but she observed he

only started slightly at the recognition, and seemed in full possession of his self-recollectedness.

‘At last!’ she said. ‘I have been waiting to see you a long time; will you not shake hands?’

‘That is as you please,’ he answered gravely, taking the outstretched hand. ‘Is Sybil well?’

‘Are you?’ she asked. ‘She is about as well as you are, to judge from your appearance; but I had better tell you at once, I have not brought any message from her. I am come simply on my own account: oblige me by sitting down—I want to talk to you.’

‘Pardon me,’ he said, coming close up to the fire, so as to be nearer to the chair from which she had risen, and was about to resume, ‘but I would rather stand. That means, I would rather decline the discussion of my private affairs, if that is the object you have in

view. It could answer no good end—the final words have been spoken on the subject.’

‘Oh, if you are obstinate, there is of course an end of the matter. I was afraid I was come on a fool’s errand, but I was willing to risk my personal discomfiture for the chance of carrying home a morsel of consolation to your unhappy wife. My idea was, that the time that has elapsed since we parted might have brought you to a better mind, and inclined you to discuss with an old woman of the world like myself, the possibilities of confession and forgiveness.’

‘I am deeply sensible of your goodness, but I must remind you that there can be no confession nor need of forgiveness where there has been no guilt. These, of course, are mere words on my part, of no weight nor value whatever in the face of Mr. Helstone’s statements, and I only repeat them as a satisfaction to my own self-respect, not in any forlorn hope that

you will believe them. As for my wife, the only consolation it is in my power to offer for the shame and suffering I have unwittingly brought upon her, is a life-long expatriation. Tell her I will in this way do my part towards meeting her wishes. All my arrangements are made ; I leave England for New Zealand next Wednesday.'

'I hope,' she answered sarcastically, 'that the sea voyage will do you good, for you look very ill, and that Mrs. Karlake will appreciate your efforts in her behalf. By the way, you do not seem to take into account that by thus running away from your disgrace you set the seal upon it, and rob her of the last shred of doubt.'

'I did not know a shred remained. You heard what she said—her condemnation was absolute. But that is not the point in question. I freely acknowledge that I am a beaten man,

stripped alike of honour and happiness. I accept my position, for which I claim no credit, for I merely surrender what I have no longer the power to retain—wife, profession, home and country.’

‘ And, all the while, your sense of injustice is so strong that you will not trust yourself with the most distant expression of it. But do consider how impossible it is for any one to believe that you would accept this position if you were blameless of the charge against you, and could prove your blamelessness! Come, Mr. Karslake, trust all the truth to an old woman like me, who is bent on doing the best for her friend! So far as I understand Mr. Helstone’s story, all this wretched entanglement dates back to a time, not only before your marriage, but before you even made your present wife’s acquaintance. I am talking now as a woman of the world, when I say it is hard to be punished

so severely for the sins of one's youth. Why don't you withdraw your vain denials and throw yourself on your wife's clemency? If you can fairly assure her of your fidelity since marriage, and explain away these curious and compromising interviews, all might yet be well. You don't know the length and breadth of a woman's toleration !'

He smiled slightly.

'You are giving me a powerful illustration of it when you are able to show so much generous kindness to a man of whom you entertain such an opinion as you do of me. Pardon me, however, if I say that a woman who could condone such offences would never have been friend or wife of mine. I have no fault to find with Sybil's complete repudiation, believing me the shameless liar and impostor that she does ; so far from that, I would not wish her to act otherwise.' He paused ; the

strongest desire of his mind at the moment was to escape or curtail this controversy: it was so cruelly useless. Miss Harrison broke the silence promptly.

‘But you reproach her, nevertheless, for her loss of faith, though to believe otherwise than she does, in the face of the facts laid before her, would not be a question of confidence but of credulous unreason.’

She looked at him sharply as she spoke, expecting some indignant disclaimer, but he showed no inclination to contest her words. He seemed to wait patiently for her to continue, but she was bent on having an answer.

‘Tell me,’ she said, ‘if I am not right in saying you blame your wife for her present attitude towards you, in spite of the ample justification of circumstances?’

‘I do not blame her,’ he replied in a low tone; ‘her character and conduct are now, as

ever, perfect in my eyes. I do not ask her to forgive me, for it would be impossible for me to plead guilty to her convictions; and I acknowledge that the pain she must feel, in thinking of me as she does, must even be greater than mine under her condemnation. Promise me you will not withdraw your friendship from her! Your thorough knowledge of all the circumstances of the case will make your sympathy of double value and effect; and I am going to ask something for myself. Will you write and give me news of her sometimes? a mere bulletin will suffice—just stating if she is well and, as time passes, happier.'

She looked at him with keen, impatient sympathy. How thoroughly he succeeded in holding under control the emotion that would have mastered a weaker nature!

'I will not pledge myself to such a correspondence, but if you write on your

arrival in the colony, perhaps I may answer your inquiries. Why have you pitched on New Zealand?’

‘Why one spot of the Antipodes rather than another?’ he asked quietly. ‘It is necessary to make a selection, and I need not enumerate to you the proverbial advantages of the climate and resources of New Zealand. I have not very sanguine expectations of my experiences there, but you will easily perceive that all channels of usefulness are cut off from me in this country, and I am at least resolved to try and prevent my life from running wasted through my fingers, because of personal failure and loss.’

‘You go alone?’ she asked abruptly—‘I mean there will be no extraneous outside influence to help you to new energy and consolation? Do you pretend not to understand me, or to feel outraged by so natural a solicitude?’

‘Whatever I might feel,’ was his answer, ‘any expression of resentment or indignation would be out of place, considering the opinions you hold and the belief you have accepted. Still, I hope you will accept my assurance that Nell Trevelyan is not to be my companion.’

Miss Harrison sighed impatiently. ‘What am I to believe or how act in this dilemma? Your voice and look and speech pour contradiction upon your guilt—no villain or hypocrite yet ever played their part to such perfection. A solution occurs to me:—some friend whom you think bound to screen has sheltered himself under your name, in his relations with this woman, and thus drawn you into inevitable but unwilling intercourse. Ah! have I hit the mark? you change colour—admit my sagacity.’

‘I do,’ he answered, with the same unmoved composure; ‘I admit it freely, but you are none

the less mistaken. But will you now consent to release me from this cross-examination? It is my fixed purpose to withhold the explanation that would establish my innocence. I do not think it is yours needlessly to distress me. Also, I want to thank you as I have never yet been able to do, for your sweet charity to my wife, when she left me broken-hearted. Continue it to her in the future; do not let her leave you till—she is a little comforted. You will find it easier, I dare say, to console her now than then, and God knows I would wish her consoled at any personal cost.'

Miss Harrison was deeply affected; the absence of all demonstration on his part touched her far more than complaint or protest could have done. She dashed away the tears from her eyes.

'And am I to understand that you mean to put the ends of the earth between you, without

making any effort to see her before you start? Are you quite sure that to abandon the woman who still loves you, is the best reparation for past unworthiness? Have you no last appeal or prayer for sight of her again, to send back through me?'

'No,' he replied firmly; 'the bitterness that is worse than death has been endured already, and I do not even desire to see her again. I would subject neither of us to such useless torture; I could not trust my own courage and firmness under the renewed ordeal of her reprobation and her tears. What good would it do to send her some reiterated assurance of the fidelity she distrusts, or mock her scorn and alienation with protestations of my own unchanged and unchanging love? She will forget me the sooner if she continue to think me unworthy. You will refrain from saying any

thing to her that would needlessly excite her sensibilities ? ’

Miss Harrison rose to depart. ‘ All that goes without asking,’ she replied, tightening the knot that fastened her heavy fur cloak, and drawing down her veil. ‘ For my part, so bootless has been our interview, that I think I shall be wise to tell her that I have not been able to see you. I will wish you *bon voyage*.’

‘ But you will allow me to see you to the station ? and,’ his duties as host suddenly occurring to his mind, ‘ you will surely take something to eat before you leave the house ? ’

She laughed a little sarcastically. ‘ Your hospitality comes rather late. I will eat nothing under your roof, thank you, nor at my age do I want any protection from one end of the world to the other. Order your servant to

get me a cab ; that is the limit of the service I require.'

She allowed him, however, to put her into it when it arrived, and give her orders to the cabman ; then, holding out her hand to bid him good-bye, and retaining it while she spoke, she added :

'I will, after reflection, grant your request, so soon as you let me know where to address you. That is, I will not fail to give you news of your wife when—she is consoled !'

CHAPTER XLIII.

TIME is finite, and many of us daily thank Heaven that it is so.

The days and longer nights ran their slow course, until the Monday preceding the Wednesday of his departure arrived.

Had the strain upon his endurance been much longer protracted, he acknowledged to himself he could not have borne it. Even now, with his ordeal reduced within the term of thirty-six hours, he began to feel the strength of his forbearance slackening, and the desire to see his wife once more before he left her, possibly for ever, assume all but uncontrollable intensity.

He did his best to wear out his physical strength on the Monday evening, before he returned home to sit down to the scarcely-tasted dinner, in the hope that exhaustion might produce sleep, the only chance of forgetfulness. He left the dining-room, where he had not allowed a fire to be lighted, and went back to the library.

The familiar room had never looked so forlorn. Owing to some inadvertence or misunderstanding, the fire had gone out and the candles had not been lighted; his favourite lamp, which always stood on the writing-table, burned, as if in sympathy with its surroundings, with a dim, inadequate light. The floor was encumbered with packing cases, placed there for temporary convenience, and over which he stumbled as he went in.

He paused and looked round him with a shudder; the room seemed haunted by ghosts

—the ruthless ghosts of memories of the days that are no more.

Following an instinct of fatigue he flung himself on the couch, and yielding to another impulse, equally imperious, he took up the soft crimson blanket, which had lain there ever since the day of Sybil's flight, and buried his face in its folds.

How long he lay there, outwardly motionless, but with the inward consciousness of relentless mental activity—tracing back the sweet brief past in tender recollection, and projecting upon his reluctant imagination the arid and distasteful future that lay before him—he did not know, but his attention was aroused at length by a gentle knock at the door.

He started up from the couch before he gave the necessary permission to enter, and stood erect, with some sense of displeasure, to

face and dismiss as soon as might be, the unwelcome intruder.

The door opens slowly, as if with reluctance or hesitation, and—is it his imagination that plays him false?—it is Sybil that enters; Sybil that approaches him with the swift, undulating, familiar motion, as he stands rooted to the ground. She is not in walking dress, as might be expected, but except that she is deadly pale, and her eyes heavy with tears and vigils, has the sweet accustomed domestic aspect.

So absolute is his bewilderment that all his practised self-command gives way. He lacks the power to advance a step or even to pronounce her name, while she, having reached his side and looked into his face, suddenly sank at his feet and threw her arms round his knees.

‘Julian, forgive me!’ she pleaded. ‘I am come back, back to the old love, the old belief. You will not reject me?’

He bent over her and tried to raise her in his arms, but his agitation overpowered him, and she resisted the movement.

‘Let me kneel a moment longer, and confess my fault. I doubted the honour I had tested, the goodness I had proved. I believed for a few miserable days that I was the most basely betrayed of women! But it is not so, my love, my darling! I do not need your assurances, only it is not so?’

She raised her beautiful pale face, alight with the enthusiasm of her recovered trust.

By this time Karslake had regained his firmness, and a full perception of the situation. He saw that she had gained no new lights, that her return was simply the result of the reaction towards her former conviction of his integrity. It was therefore possible for him to accept his blessedness fully,

implicitly, without detriment to honour or conscience.

‘It is not so,’ he said, repeating her words as she desired, and with the same clear, tender inflection as of old. He was calmer than she, now that the first shock of emotion was over. ‘You are the only woman I have ever loved, loved now as never before.’

He raised her from the ground, and for a moment their lips clung together in a passionate embrace.

‘Renew,’ he said, ‘the old promise made at the altar, the promise I asked for in vain on the day of our last meeting and parting—nothing but death shall separate us any more. Sybil, you have given me back more than life; say again you believe in me!’

‘With an inflexible belief,’ she answered, with a tearful smile; ‘a pledge once broken, but that shall never be broken again. Julian,

I have nothing to ask of the past or the future ; I do not stipulate nor even wish to remain in England. I am willing to go with you to New Zealand.'

For a moment his brow clouded, then cleared.

'That sacrifice I shall scarcely ask of you, but to-night I am not able to consider the future, the present is all I can grasp. It is really you, Sybil, my sweetest wife, my fondest friend ! I mean you are not a wraith, a vision of the brain, such as has tempted me almost to madness at times ? It is real flesh and blood I hold ?

'So real,' she answered, with a swift recurrence to the unselfish tenderness and sweet solicitude of their former relations, 'that I am beginning to be conscious of cold and hunger. I left Esher some hours ago.'

She saw the extent of both his physical exhaustion and mental excitation, and was anxious to relax the strain. There was something infinitely pathetic to her mind in his present rare and passionate abandonment, in contrast with the consummate self-restraint he had manifested in all the cruelly trying circumstances of the past.

A sense of deep compunction for her involuntary disloyalty strengthened within her, but she would not express it. It was her object now to soothe, not stimulate his sensibility.

‘May I ring the bell?’ she said, rising from his side, ‘and try and introduce a little comfort into our arrangements? I should very much have liked to have made you some coffee and toasted you some bread, so as to join the links of the chain of our broken intercourse,

but you have put that out of my power. We must submit now to have it sent up from Mrs. Norris.'

She moved about the room as she talked, reducing things to order with the old inimitable grace, while he, leaning back on the couch, watched her with silent, rapturous delight.

There are some joys worth purchasing, even at the cost of the inexpressible pain they had each endured.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SYBIL KARSLAKE'S return to her husband's roof, under the influence of her restored faith and quickened love, withdrew at once from his life that element of bitter personal wrong and disappointment which, though courageously borne, had been so hard to bear: but it was not able to do more than this. He had indeed recovered what he most esteemed in life, but he had not recovered any new power of disarming Helstone's malice or circumventing his efforts for his overthrow. He fully understood that the fact of their reunion would be held to forfeit the concession won at so cruel a cost from Helstone's persistent enmity, and that the persecution which had been for a time

suspended would be at once renewed, probably in a spirit of still more determined hostility.

His outward life, with all its fine possibilities, was none the less irretrievably wrecked because his wife had consented to share his downfall.

He was just as little able now as before, if he would preserve inviolate the obligations of his bond, to take any steps towards the defence of his own honour. Simply, he must accept his defeat and retire from a contest in which it was denied him to put forth his strength.

Moreover, he had already made arrangements for the future which it was difficult or impossible to undo, and which would involve a total change of place and position.

It was part of the hard necessity laid upon him that he must tell his wife that she must consent, not to go to New Zealand indeed, but to

follow him far away from his late sphere of work and high consideration, and to take part in the certain suspicion and uncertain disgrace which would undoubtedly rest on his name.

This he did on the day following their reunion, with that characteristic blending of solicitous tenderness and personal resolution which Sybil had always found so difficult to resist. No thought of resistance or even of discussion was now present to her mind; she accepted the sacrifice demanded of her with an absolute satisfaction, her chivalrous nature going out to meet and welcome the demand made upon it.

‘Simply,’ she said, ‘where you lead I follow. I submit implicitly to your decisions; and nothing will wound my conscience more than that you should think it necessary to justify to me any course of action you may think it right to pursue. I will win back your

faith in me by a perfect obedience, that not only asks no questions but wants no information.'

He seemed to weigh her answer before he spoke, and then he said :

'Some women would say this, Sybil, under the idea of having their words met with tender protest and repudiation, but I know you speak in good faith. The proof that I shall give of my belief in you is to take you at your word, and accept all the devotion you offer.'

'And that is all I ask,' she answered brightly.

This conversation had taken place over the breakfast-table, so anxious had Julian been to open the subject of his present position and plans without a day's unnecessary delay, and learn in what way her judgment and feelings would incline.

At the same moment his servant brought in a card and handed it to him, saying—

‘I have shown the gentleman into the library. He said you would be certain to see him.’

Karslake nodded assent, but Sybil's quick eye detected an indefinable change of expression in his face. When the man had left the room he turned to her and showed her the card. It bore the name of ‘Mr. Robert Anstruther.’

‘What will you say to me,’ he asked, ‘when I tell you it will be necessary for me to see this man alone?’

‘That I am destitute of the curiosity of my sex,’ she answered, smiling. ‘Do not keep him waiting; I heard his voice in the hall, and am sure he is not a man to be trifled with.’

He took her hand and kissed it with that sort of intense recognition of her generosity which always moved her deeply. Her eyes followed him out of the room with a yearning,

wistful look : after all, a mystery between husband and wife is hard to bear, in spite of mutual magnanimity.

Karslake entered the next room, and found his visitor pacing impatiently up and down the floor. On the opening of the door he turned sharply round and looked at him curiously.

‘ You keep late hours, Julian Karslake,’ he said, in a loud, harsh, but not unkindly tone, ‘ and forget that I am a man of business. An hour late on ’Change may make the difference of some thousands to my pocket. What is the meaning of this?’ kicking the packing-cases with his foot as he spoke. ‘ I have been absent from England just eighteen months, and find things all at sixes and sevens on my return. With whom were you speaking in the other room just now? voices were low but my ears are keen : it was a woman’s voice !’

Karslake looked surprised. 'It was to my wife. You have not forgotten that I am married?'

'Your wife!' repeated the other, with an air of angry impatience; 'does it run in the blood, and you are playing me false in your turn? I was told last night your wife had left you; what am I to believe?'

Karslake hesitated. 'Before I answer, will you be good enough to explain what you have heard, and from whom? Had I known of your return——'

He stopped; he had been on the point of saying that in that case he should have made him the confidant of his affairs, but a second thought recalled to him the difficulty and danger that would have attended his doing so. He changed colour under Mr. Anstruther's angry scowl of baffled compre-

hension, and recognised with a sort of desperate patience that the toils of his miserable position were about to be twisted into fresh complications.

Mr. Anstruther watched his face with close attention. Then he said :

‘I am come this morning to find out the right and wrong of what I heard last night. You know my detestation of all shuffling and double dealing ; the inquiry I am here to conduct shall be sifted to the bottom. Will you bring your wife in and make us acquainted ? Since you say she is on the spot, it is well that she should hear all that passes between us. In God’s name, man, can it be that you hesitate !’

He did hesitate, but he knew his reluctance must yield to necessity. He went back to the dining-room, and told Sybil she was wanted. His manner was as usual, but she could detect

beneath it the indications of some great anxiety.

‘It is Mr. Anstruther,’ he explained, ‘my former guardian. He is just returned from America. I must have mentioned him to you, I think.’

Her belief was he had never done so, but she would not express it, and they went back together.

Karslake presented his wife with an air of tender pride no mental perturbation was sufficient to repress, and the old Scotch merchant was secretly impressed with the beauty and manner of the pale, distinguished-looking girl.

After having made her some old-fashioned compliments, to which Sybil replied with a winning grace that completed the conquest of his good-will, he again turned sharply towards Julian.

‘ I am no gossip-monger, as you know, and moreover had an impression that you at least might be trusted to manage your own affairs with decency and credit. I only returned from New York yesterday morning, and last night went to the house of an old friend, to ask and answer questions. Here I chanced to meet a man you know, Gilbert Helstone, who was able to give me all the information concerning you I was anxious to get. It was not of such a nature, I grant, as I expected: he told us an astounding story of your married life. One item I already perceive was incorrect, and yet he had every appearance of speaking in good faith. It is an extraordinary muddle. One question—is it true you have given up your living?’

‘ It is quite true.’

‘ And the reasons?—but I will wait till the man comes. I engaged him to meet me

here in your presence at eleven o'clock, to investigate the matter properly. He fails in punctuality.'

Sybil drew a deep breath of intense excitement; she scarcely ventured to look at her husband, as he answered:

'You heard Gilbert Helstone guilty of the baseness of making my private affairs a matter of public discussion, and you have asked him to meet me in my own house!'

'I have. It appeared to me the quickest way of discovering the truth, to bring accuser and accused face to face; it is not worth while for you to resent the intrusion. If to report facts that have become matters of public notoriety be a baseness, there are few amongst us not guilty of the same. But I hear the door-bell; let us have him in without delay.'

'It will not be necessary for my wife to remain?'

‘Pardon me, again,’ returned Mr. Anstruther, ‘but it will be eminently necessary.’

As he spoke Helstone entered the room, with a certain assumption of contemptuous ease he was inwardly far from feeling; but any sense of embarrassment yielded at once to the shock of surprise with which he recognised the totally unexpected presence of Sybil.

Mr. Anstruther perceived it, and gave a short laugh. ‘One of your facts of last night, my dear sir, is already disproved. I find the injured wife, who was about to proclaim her wrongs in the Divorce Court, on the best possible terms with her husband. How do you explain the discrepancy?’

For a moment Helstone gnawed his lip in savage silence—how, indeed, could he explain?

By what subtlety of fraud had she been won back again? for that she was won back was

certain from the glance he had intercepted as passing from her sweet eyes to Karlake—a glance eloquent of tender encouragement. His feelings towards him were those of impotent fury.

‘I cannot explain. I am simply confounded. It seems like some infernal witchcraft. Ask him’—with a brutal oath—‘if she had left him, and why? In her presence he can scarcely forswear himself.’

‘It is quite true,’ said Karlake firmly, ‘that my wife had left me, under the impression I had deeply wronged her—an impression produced by Mr. Helstone himself. Since then she has recovered her belief in my innocence of the charges he brings against me, and which I have never failed to assert. She only returned to me last night.’

There was a moment's pause; then he added, in a lower tone, approaching Mr.

Anstruther and involuntarily laying his hand on his arm in the extremity of his suppressed anxiety, 'Let this explanation suffice!'

Sybil looked at him in painful surprise; she had never seen him more deeply moved. Although he succeeded as usual in commanding his voice to steadiness, the workings of his face were beyond the power of his self-control. She perceived, too, that both Mr. Anstruther and even Helstone were perplexed by an appeal that could only produce the effect of deepening suspicion. The latter burst into a mocking laugh.

'Spare him,' he said, 'as he entreats. His nerves are unstrung, and it is a pity that his wife's ears should be vexed with a thrice told tale. God! how I loathe the exhaustless perfidy and hypocrisy of the man, and deplore the inconceivable blindness of the girl! Contact with him has spoiled her sense of honour.'

‘Silence!’ shouted Mr. Anstruther in an authoritative voice, as he marked the involuntary shrinking of Julian, and saw the look of proud defiance with which Sybil changed her position in order to place herself at his side.

‘A light breaks in upon my mind,’ he continued. ‘You have no need to repeat the scandal, Mr. Helstone. You gave it to us full length last night, with all the aid of realistic detail, and I own I was puzzled, and my faith in the man shaken. But one point in honour you suppressed, the name of the mistress. It now occurs to me that I can supply that omission, and perhaps let in daylight upon the mystery. The solution did not offer itself to me before.’

He looked with angry impatience towards Karslake as he spoke, anxious to meet his eyes, but without effect.

Helstone repeated the word 'solution !' with so venomous a sneer as to add fuel to the other's indignation. He turned upon him sharply.

'It seems to be a matter of personal satisfaction to you to prove Julian Karslake a liar and a villain. You will possibly think it strange, Mr. Helstone, but I have an older knowledge of the matter even than yourself; my acquaintance with Nell Trevelyan dates nearly five years back.'

Helstone started. 'And you can still keep terms with her seducer, who has doubled his guilt since then, and betrayed a nobler woman to a deeper disgrace !'

Anstruther shook Karslake impatiently by the arm.

'What is the meaning of this farce ?' he demanded. 'You suffer a girl like your wife to listen to such taunts, know yourself accredited with the parentage of Nell Trevelyan's child,

flouted with its monstrous likeness to yourself, and do not speak the one word that would clear you! By God, you deserve to be left struggling in the mire!’

‘Leave me there,’ said Karslake, in a low suppressed voice, ‘it is all I ask. My wife believes in me, I have ceased to care for any other judgment; I beseech you to forbear any further attempt at explanation!’ He spoke in a tone of almost desperate entreaty.

Mr. Anstruther continued to gaze at him with increasing displeasure and suspicion.

‘There is more here,’ he said, ‘than shows on the surface. No lunatic would give up his living and hand over his character to the tender mercies of his enemy, besides, worst of all, torturing the heart of the woman he has married, on the inducement I suppose you to have. I refuse to hold my tongue unless you assure me you have made a clean breast of it

to Mrs. Karslake, and put her in absolute possession of the facts. I am more indifferent about your relations with Mr. Helstone. Has he done this, my dear young lady?' bending with kind solicitude to catch Sybil's low answer.

'My confidence in him is complete,' she said. 'It is unnecessary to say on what it is grounded.'

'I think otherwise,' he answered gravely; 'you are upheld now by mere temporary excitement; in cold blood the force of what Mr. Helstone has told you will sink into your mind and disturb its peace. You returned to your husband, I am told, last night, under one impression; you may leave him again a week hence, under another. I will put a stop to such fluctuations: it is the old life story, which has moved my disgust more than my admiration a hundred times before—Julian, the

honest and good, making himself the scape-goat of his worthless brother !'

There was a moment's profound hush. Helstone held his breath under a rush of feeling he was unable to analyse. Sybil looked up with a rapturous smile into Karslake's face.

'For your sake I rejoice ; for my own, I could not have been better satisfied.'

He stooped down and kissed her solemnly, but he did not speak. Why was he still so pale, and apparently so little relieved by the removal of this infamous stigma ? Both Helstone and Anstruther gazed at his stern, set face with baffled comprehension.

'Your husband's behaviour is incomprehensible to me, my dear young lady,' said the latter. 'I am told he accepted even before marriage to bear the onus of his brother's fault, and has continued to do so till now, at the

risk, nay, at the positive loss, of what all men hold dearest. And this not only for the most thankless reprobate that ever drew breath, but for one whose untimely but welcome death had put him out of the reach of praise or blame. On this point,' he added, turning suddenly upon Julian, 'I insist upon an explanation ! You are neither fool nor madman ; why did you not speak the word that would have spared all this false accusation and disgrace ?'

Karslake raised his eyes boldly, in defiance of inward sinking of heart, and looked steadily first at the speaker, then at Helstone, who was sitting at the table, his chin propped on his hands, and his gaze riveted on his face.

'My motives were sufficient for myself, and, as the matter now stands, it would be a work of supererogation to discuss them. One only I

have wronged by so doing, and she has forgiven me ; to no one else are any explanations due.'

Then, addressing Helstone, not from any prompting of personal feeling, but from the stringent necessity of diverting Mr. Anstruther's aroused suspicion, he asked :

'Are you satisfied?'

'I am satisfied that I must shift my conviction of your dishonesty from one point to another ; my belief in your fundamental insincerity is as great as ever. Only on the condition of some rational explanation of this practical imposture shall I change my opinion.'

Karslake preserved a haughty silence. Helstone maintained his scrutiny of his face. Suddenly he turned towards Mr. Anstruther.

'An idea strikes me,' he said. 'There is something worse to conceal than this vulgar

crime of profligacy and desertion. If Julian Karslake has submitted to this imputation, it is to shield himself from the detection of some more serious transgression. He and his brother were doubtless associates in fraud. Are you sure that the latter is dead?'

Karslake neither started nor changed colour, but he must have been more than human not to have betrayed by some indefinable subtlety of expression that a blow had been struck upon his sensations, and the perceptions of the man who watched him were exceptionally keen. A cold cynical smile parted his lips.

'He has deceived you,' he said quietly; 'his brother is alive.'

At his first suggestion the strongly-marked face of Mr. Anstruther had undergone a change. Hitherto he had preserved a sort of impatient toleration of Karslake, but at these words a look of hard vindictiveness came into

his face. His rugged cheek blanched with the strength of his emotion, and his eyes glittered with a cruel light.

‘Is it so?’ he muttered, going close up to Julian, and laying his hands heavily on his shoulders, so as to bring his gaze to bear upon his face — ‘is this the explanation? your traitorous lie has robbed me of my just revenge! You have pawned your honour to hide your brother’s infamy, but you have pawned it in vain! Mine is a righteous vengeance, and shall reach him at the world’s end. I warned you in old times that I would never spare the one for the sake of the other, and now I hold your cheat on my credulity as only second to his felony. Would you attempt denial? Your word where Harry Karslake was concerned, would not have a feather’s weight!’

He was hoarse with rage and excitement; his detestation of the younger Karslake had the

intensity of a passion, and no disappointment of his life had been keener than when death robbed him, as he had thought, of his power of legal punishment.

‘If denial could avail,’ said Karslake, freeing himself from his grasp and meeting his infuriated gaze with dauntless courage, ‘I should possibly attempt it, and settle the wrong with my own conscience; but I perceive it would be in vain. Hear me speak,’ he continued, addressing Helstone and his wife; ‘there shall be no lack of explanation now.’

He went up to Sybil’s side and took her hand.

‘No pledges you have given me in the past shall bind you for the future; you shall be free to make a new departure on the grounds of what I am going to say—free from shadow of blame or thought of reproach. Simply, the case stands thus. I have kept my brother’s secret, not, alas!

to my own hurt alone, because the paramount obligation of my life was fixed as devotion to his interests. I swore before God to my dying mother to sacrifice my own welfare absolutely to his, should it come into collision with it, and it was the force of this boyish oath that helped me to endurance and resistance, under those circumstances of our early life so bitterly complained of by Mr. Anstruther. Do not think,' he added, 'that I claim any merit for this: as circumstances stood it was the most rudimentary form of duty.'

He paused, whether to give the opportunity of reply or to rally his own taxed endurance seemed uncertain, but no one spoke. Mr. Anstruther stood at the window with his back towards the speaker, gnawing his lip and even his nails, in the extremity of his repressed excitement. Helstone, for the first time, sat with lowered gaze and with his hand shading his

eyes. Sybil alone looked up with a gaze full of tenderness and pity.

‘I should never have dared to woo you, Sybil,’ he continued, ‘while this responsibility rested upon me. Nothing would be gained by dwelling on the penalties my pledge exacted, but I would not have asked any woman to share them with me. When at last I came to you with the story of my love, I believed that I was free, accepting as proved the report of Harry’s shipwreck at sea. At that time also I was perfectly ignorant of what the last act of his life had been. I am not quite sure that I should have considered a crime washed out by death, and consequently buried in oblivion, a sufficient obstacle against trying to win the woman I adored, but I did not know it. When I did, our engagement was so far advanced, and circumstances had become so complicated, that a rupture would have been

difficult. I had even begun to hope that your happiness was involved in mine, and, unable to forecast events, I thought you need never know aught beyond the fact that I had once a brother. Here was an error of judgment, perhaps of conscience too; had I not made it, the shame and anguish of this hour would have been mine alone.' His voice fell and a flush came over his face.

'I thank God,' said Sybil in a low tone, 'that we are so bound together that it is not only my privilege, but my duty to share it.'

'Ah! but there is a point beyond which even your generous co-operation must not go. But hear me out, Sybil—I want to justify your trust at every point. The day that Mr. Helstone first saw me and Nell Trevelyan together, was the day when she brought me the news that Harry had effected his escape from the wreck, and was still a living man. It was

his presence in her house, and the necessity of providing for his safety, that took me to the bedside of their sick child, where I again renewed the vows of my earlier years, pledging myself to keep the secret of my brother's existence inviolate. That is all that I have to say in the way of self-vindication : what remains——'

Mr. Anstruther turned round and looked at him at this point.

'What remains,' he said, interrupting him, 'is an acknowledgment on my part that I have done you an injustice, and wish to recall what I spoke in my anger just now. It will not make a jot of difference to my action towards your brother, who shall stand in the dock sooner or later, and take the wages of his felony ; but I am glad to be able to revert to my former good opinion of yourself. Also, Mrs. Karslake seems to me true metal enough not to visit on your head the awkward fact

that in marrying you, she may probably have a convict for a brother-in-law.'

Helstone dropped his hand to observe how Karslake bore the brutal plainness of this speech. It did not seem to affect him much, except in regard to its impression upon his wife. He was looking at her with an expression of grave solicitude, in which there was as little of shame or humiliation as of irritation or anger, and as he met the wistful, yearning tenderness of her eyes, he yielded to an impulse he had checked before, and going up to her took both her hands in his.

'It is quite true,' he said, 'I have brought this possible ignominy upon you, but I know you acquit me of doing it wittingly, and I shall never ask or rather suffer you to share it. Even to you, my wife, beloved as you alone know how I have loved you, my first duty is not due. I am bound to my brother's fate by

an obligation without limit or reserve, and the more so as I have failed to keep his secret, and finally betrayed the trust that I have laboured so hard to redeem. Sybil,' he added more passionately, and straining her hands for a moment against his breast, 'gauge the bitterness of my self-reproach when I tell you I would sacrifice our love, could I alone pay the penalty, to have secured Harry's safety! Having lost it, at least I cast in my lot with his: I see no room in my life for any personal indulgences.'

'How am I to understand you, Julian?'

There was a vibration of anguish in her voice that cut him to the quick, but was not effectual to move him from his purpose. He did not even shrink from meeting the reproachful pathos of her glance.

'I simply mean that I will not ask you to endure the life that is before me. I shall join

my brother, with the intention of urging him to surrender himself to justice ; and if I succeed, shall of course identify myself, so far as possible, with every step in the process of his condemnation. But that failing—and it will fail—I shall share his expatriation and help his concealment, the only consolation left being the effort to save him from sinking lower to a deeper shame. Would you be equal to this hard co-operation, this detestable companionship ? And if your magnanimity carried you so far, I would not accept the ruin of your fair life. No, dear ; you shall return to the pure family affection and literary ardours from which I had so hard a matter to win you—would to God I had failed !’

He bent over her and kissed her forehead, not with passion, but with the calm tenderness of an absolute renunciation. Then he turned to Mr. Anstruther.

‘Oblige me,’ he said, ‘by telling Mr.

Helstone and my wife the extent of Harry's offence. Felony is a wide term; they may think him guilty of a worse crime than he has committed.'

'That is scarcely possible,' replied the old merchant drily, 'but I will meet your wishes so far as I reasonably can.'

As he spoke he drew out his pocket-book, slowly opened it, and extracted carefully the forged cheque.

'I have carried this about with me ever since it was placed in my hands, but with small hope of turning it to account as I am able to do now. Shall I explain?'

He approached the table where Helstone was sitting, and, spreading it before him, indicated the point; the addition of a nought had multiplied the original sum ten-fold; what other manipulation had been required had been executed with consummate dexterity.

Helstone nodded comprehension, and then glanced towards Karslake. A sudden purpose was forming in his mind.

‘One moment,’ he said. ‘I am professionally interested in so delicate a misdemeanour; suffer me to test the forgery by the light.’

He rose, as if with the intention of approaching the window, but as he passed the fire he suddenly crushed together the morsel of paper he held, and dropped it into the fervent flame.

‘I have wronged you,’ he said, turning his pale face to Karslake, ‘as grossly as one man can wrong another. Accept my reparation!’

There was a moment's pause of suspense, and then Mr. Anstruther, with an inarticulate cry of rage, made as if he would have flung himself upon him in absolute personal encounter. Helstone coolly evaded the attack.

‘I own,’ he said, ‘I am liable to any reprisals at your hands, only spare me the humiliating defeat such thews and sinews as yours would inflict! I have been guilty of an unpardonable outrage, and deserve and expect no quarter. My only regret is I possibly anticipated your own action.’

Sybil came forward, and knelt at his feet.

‘Oh! forgive him,’ she pleaded, ‘not only Mr. Helstone, but Harry Karlake. Think what he has suffered already, what shame and agony this bold deed has spared us all!’

Her words distilled like dew; her pathetic beauty moved him more than he would acknowledge.

‘Your righteous vengeance,’ she went on, ‘would have ruined three lives, instead of one. Is it not better as it is? The punishment Harry deserved would have been endured in its fulness by Julian alone. Think of the long

penance he has suffered, and accept it as his brother's atonement ! '

He pushed her from him, but not roughly, and gathering himself together, rose and glared at Helstone.

'Your deed is actionable,' he said, 'and I will strain the law to punish it with its utmost rigour. I will subpoena Julian Karslake and his wife as witnesses—he acknowledges the obligation of an oath, and we will put it to the test. You will find he has gained nothing by your fraud. I will not be balked of my revenge.'

He spoke harshly, but there was a visible decrease of excitement in his manner.

'Nothing could condone my offence,' answered Helstone, 'but the irresistible impulse of the moment. It seemed the one way, however unjustifiable, out of an inextricable difficulty. I saw an appeal to your generosity

would have failed, but we all learn to accept the inevitable. I believe time and reflection will reconcile you to your loss—otherwise, I must bear my punishment.'

Anstruther turned and looked at Karlake.

'Am I not to be insulted by your congratulations, too? or is your triumph too deep for words?'

'Mine is a very mixed feeling. I am like a man from whose shoulders a burden has fallen, that he had nerved himself to carry all his life, but who doubts his right of deliverance. There will be little satisfaction to my mind in this accidental reprieve, unless you endorse it by your fullest forgiveness.'

'Towards yourself? That I have already done. Towards your brother? I have lost the power to hurt him.'

He spoke with concentrated bitterness. Karlake looked at him with a comprehension

and sympathy that did more to assuage his just displeasure than expostulation or entreaty.

‘I cannot help acknowledging that Mr. Helstone has gone beyond right and justice in the step he has taken, and has robbed you of a satisfaction you were justified in exacting. Let me, at least, press upon you that pecuniary reparation you once refused, but which is now more than ever binding on my conscience ; and for the rest, all real nobleness and sacrifice in this matter still remain with you.’

He paused, eyeing the stern, rugged countenance with something of the wistful, deprecating solicitude of his boyhood.

‘You say you have lost the power of proving Harry’s guilt. Go a step higher than the forced acceptance of Mr. Helstone’s action, and abandon the desire to do so ! Suffer me to write to him, and tell him you are willing

to forgive him under certain conditions. His welfare is as much now as ever my concern.'

Anstruther tried to harden his heart, but in vain ; the fairness and directness of Karslake's appeal commended itself to his mind, and as he looked into the pale harassed face of the speaker, and weighed the effects of the protracted trial he had endured, the real tenderness he entertained for him won the final victory.

'The conditions, at least, shall be of my own dictation,' he said grimly, 'and without appeal from your fanatical sense of duty. I am over-matched by villainy and sophistry, but I will take my stand on one or two points. First, you must take back your resignation from the bishop, and return to reason and common-sense ; secondly, if Harry Karslake is to receive condonation for his crime, it must be on the understanding that he returns to this country to

marry Nell Trevelyan, and takes her and her brat back to the Colony with him. England can never hold us both ! You must strictly keep your own counsel, as to this nefarious loss of evidence, till the knot is tied between him and his girl, and he pledges himself to expatriation, or he will cheat us yet. Do you consent ? ’

‘ I have no option but to consent,’ replied Karslake, grasping his hand gratefully, ‘ and could not desire better terms. I will secure his interests in New Zealand.’

Mr. Anstruther interrupted him with a satirical laugh. ‘ Doubtless ! and will find it necessary to visit him at the Antipodes, to see for yourself they are duly secured—that Nell Trevelyan says her prayers, and the boy is being reared in the way he should go ! Those points I will leave you to settle with your wife and your conscience. I must go now—a

beaten man ! But for all that, Mrs. Karslake, I shall come and see you sometimes.'

He moved to the door to depart, and Sybil accompanied him out of the room.

When they were alone the two men looked at each other. Helstone spoke.

'I knew he would only bluster and give in, but it was a bold step only success could justify. After a time, Karslake, I may ask for your friendship. With such a temper as yours, I make sure of your forgiveness. I will prove my good-will by wishing you all the happiness you deserve.'

He waited for no reply, grasped strenuously the hand the other extended to him, and went out.

In the hall he met Sybil.

'I will leave it to your husband to persuade you to forgive me. What more shall I say? that I give you free permission to repair my

blunders by your devotion? Child! I am almost willing to own he is worthy of you. For the rest, I am going to Esher, to win Miss Harrison's heart by the tale I have to tell. Good-bye!'

THE END.

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